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'That's where the Wicket-Gate is,' she said.

PAGE 158,

Peter the Pilgrim

BY

L. T. MEADE South

AUTHOR OF

'GIRLS OF THE FOREST,' 'THE ODDS AND THE EVENS,' 'QUEEN ROSE,'
'THE REBEL OF THE SCHOOL,' 'THE SQUIRE'S LITTLE GIRL,'
ETC.

WITH SIX ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

HAROLD COPPING

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PETER THE PILGRIM.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD CAGE.

OO was tall and lank; she had long legs, rather large bones, and a thin, dark, eager face. She was between ten and eleven years of age, but there was nothing what-

ever of the child about her; her ways were womanly and old-fashioned; her brows were constantly knit with a thoughtful, not to say puzzled expression.

None of what are called the pleasant things of life had come across Loo's path. She was a poor child, and she lived in a tenement house.

Mrs Rankin, Loo's mother, was known as a sort of Jack-of-all-trades in the house where she lived. Loo's quickness and sharpness were inherited from her mother. Mrs Rankin was the most thrifty woman in the Buildings. She was a sergeant's widow, and had a small pension; but she was not

at all the sort of woman to sit down quietly and be content with a pittance when by hard labour she could earn more. So she took in some of her neighbours' washing, and went out charing, and did a good bit of mending for some sailors who had rooms on the top floor; and, in short, from morning till night was never idle.

Mrs Rankin's flat was as clean as a new pin, and Loo, when she was not at school, was always helping her mother to tidy up, and brush and dust, and polish and scrub, and keep things in apple-pie order.

Loo had a brother. His name was Peter; he was two years younger than she was, and almost a baby in comparison. Peter was pretty, and had a gentle, fair face; he adored Loo, who defended him like a young tigress. She was not at all a gentle child—her bringing up had made her as hard and sharp as a little nail; but she was soft and gentle enough where Peter was concerned.

The day when this story begins was a very memorable one. Loo, who always slept like a top, awoke quite early and looked about the neat little bedroom; then she glanced at her mother, who was sleeping the sleep of the weary, and finally got softly out of bed and began to put on her clothes.

'I may as well do it now as never,' she said to herself. 'Mother mustn't know a thing until Pete comes back and brings it with him. Then, when it's settled in real comfort, and no mess nowhere, and Pete certain sure that Joe Carter will give it enough to live on, why then mother won't have the heart to disappoint Pete; but it would never do, that it wouldn't, to let her know aforehand.'

'What are you doing, Loo? Why can't you stay quiet?' called Mrs Rankin from the bed. 'It's a deal too early to get up yet, child. Get back into bed this minute and let me finish out my nap.'

'I'm going into the kitchen, mother,' said Loo. 'I'll not make the least bit of noise, never you fear. I want to do something afore I'm off to school. You forget that Peter's coming back from the country to-day.'

'I forget?' called out Mrs Rankin in a sharp, angry voice. She sat up in bed and looked alarmingly wide awake. 'I ain't likely to—not with you about. If there is a poor child that's spoilt out-and-out, it's that brother of yours; and you have no one to blame but yourself. You'll never make a man of him while you coddle and fuss over him the way you do.'

'You leave Pete alone, mother,' said Loo. 'He'll

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be all right when the time comes; and, anyhow, I ain't going to see him put upon by nobody.'

She banged into the kitchen as she spoke, and Mrs Rankin considered for a moment whether it was worth her while to follow her or not. She finally decided that she would have, as she expressed it, her nap out; and Loo, after listening attentively in the silent kitchen, gave vent to a sigh of relief and began to set to work on the task which she had in hand.

At one end of the kitchen was a tiny scullery. Loo opened the door. It was not yet six o'clock; but, as the day was an August one, there was, of course, abundance of light in the scullery. The little girl shut the door softly behind her, and pulled from under the dresser an oddly shaped parcel. It had been smuggled in, without her mother knowing anything about it, the evening before. The parcel was covered with some untidy and much-torn brown paper. Loo removed this torn wrapper, and gazed at her treasure with black eyes of rapture. 'Yes,' she said, clasping her hands, 'it'll do-it'll do fine. Joe Carter kept his word; I'll say that for him. Won't Pete be pleased! Why, it's just the very thing. Now, let me see, are the wires strong?'

She went on her knees and began patiently and carefully to examine an old cage, too large for an ordinary singing-bird, and yet not quite large enough for a dove or parrot. The cage was much battered; but, on the whole, it was sound—the flooring was not eaten away, nor any of the wires broken.

'Yes, it'll do,' murmured Loo; 'it'll hold 'most anything. I dunno what he'll bring back: maybe a squirrel, maybe a dove, maybe a blackbird; but whatever it is, it'll fit into the cage; and when mother sees how tidy we'll keep it, and how happy it makes Peter, she won't have the heart to turn it away. Mother's the best woman in the world, only she's a bit hard when it comes to cleanliness; but she won't be hard when she sees how happy this here cage makes Pete.'

Loo had been kneeling down and examining the cage. Now she sprang to her feet, and set to work vigorously on the cleaning process. No one could clean better than Loo. The boards at the bottom of the cage quite changed colour, and looked white and almost new, from the scrubbing she gave them; the old wires lost some of their rust and shone faintly; the perches were scraped to look as white as the floor beneath. The cage was ready for its unknown occupant. Loo slipped it

back into its place again under the little dresser, gathered up the torn pieces of paper and string, and went back to the kitchen. She felt excited; her eyes shone. The cage certainly would look lovely, but the question of questions had yet to be answered: What sort of creature was going to live in it?

'I wonder—I do wonder—wot he'll bring back,' thought Loo. 'I give him sixpence to buy it, and it was to be alive. I do wonder wot he have got. I hope more than anything it's a dove. That cage would be just the one for a dove; it would fit it fine, and I'd like to hear it a-cooing. Well, Pete'll be back soon now, and then I'll know.'

Loo put the kettle on the little range, and presently her mother came out and began to prepare breakfast. Loo's heart beat when she saw her. What would Mrs Rankin say to the cage in the scullery? She was very fond of calling things she didn't like 'rubbidge.' Suppose she called the beautiful clean cage 'rubbidge,' and refused to give it house-room?

'What are you knitting your brows like that for, child?' said Mrs Rankin. 'Seems to me you're hiding something.'

'There ain't nothing for me to hide, mother,' said Loo evasively.

'Well, I'm sure I don't care whether there is or not. You can't hide much in this here place without me a-finding of it out. I know your pranks, and the way you're always a-coddling of Peter; but anyhow I have no time to be worried with you this morning. I'm off to Mrs Colonel Sawyer's for a day's charing, and I promised the cook to be there not a minute later than eight o'clock, so I can't stay more than a minute just to swallow a cup of tea. You tidy up after I'm gone, child, and build up the fire in the range, so as it won't go out. There's a little bit of broken meat in the cupboard, and some bread, and that'll do for your dinner when you come back from school. You can turn out the kitchen this afternoon, and see that you make it like a new pin, with no dust in corners nowhere. There now, I must be off. Good-bye, child-good-bye.'

CHAPTER II.

THE THING THAT WAS TO LIVE IN THE CAGE.

OTHING could have happened better. Mrs
Rankin was out for the day. The cage
was safe. Loo clasped her hands in
ecstasy; then with a right goodwill she

flew round, put the place in apple-pie order, tidied her own little person, and started off for school in excellent time.

School was over, and Loo was back again in the neat little flat, her heart beating with that strange new excitement which had made everything seem so fresh and interesting that day.

Her special friends, Jessie and Rose Hobson, begged her to stop and play a game with them, but Loo refused in quite a rude voice.

'I can't be bothered,' she said; 'Peter's a-coming back.'

'As if that mattered!' said Rose in a pert voice.
'You do make such a fuss about that Pete of yours,
Loo. He have just had his fortnight's holiday in

the country, and why should he spoil our sport to-day? It do seem hard, that it do.'

Loo turned and faced Rose and Jessie.

'Look here,' she said, her words coming slowly and her white little face growing a trifle whiter. 'Peter needn't spoil your play—he ain't your brother. Go and play as much as you like, the two of you; I'm a-going home.'

There was a withering scorn in Loo's words, which made Jessie colour and Rose laugh. The Hobsons lived in the same block of buildings as the Rankins, but their flat was not a tidy one. Loo mounted the stairs with a lofty air, and let herself into her mother's neat little home. She went straight to the scullery, took the clean cage from its place under the dresser, and placed it boldly on the kitchen table: then she sat down opposite to it, and eyed it with deep interest while she munched her broken-meat and bread.

Loo was not particularly fond of children, but she had a passion for animals. All her passions were shared by Peter. He was a sort of gentle little echo of Loo. What would he buy with sixpence in the country? Would it be a squirrel or a bird? She had warned him to be sure and buy something that could live in a cage. She thought that perhaps doves could be had for sixpence apiece in the country. She ardently hoped that the little master of the beautiful, clean cage would be a ring-dove.

The time of Peter's return was not quite certain, but Loo calculated that he might arrive at any moment now. The van which was sent to the railway station to meet the children might put him down at the door of Pincher's Buildings at any time, and then his little step might be heard hammering eagerly up the stairs, and he might come in clasping his treasure in his arms. What a lot he would have to tell Loo, and Loo to tell him! What fun there would be putting the darling animal into its cage! She earnestly hoped that he would come soon, for at two o'clock she had to go back to school.

What sound was that? Surely, surely—— Loo flew to the door and opened it. Yes, yes, she was right; she could not mistake it. That was the brisk, the dear, the eager little step—stronger and brisker, too, than when it went away; a hurrying step, coming up fast—very fast.

'Loo,' called out Rose Hobson, 'here's Peter!'

'Yes, I'm back, Loo!' called Peter himself.

And then a sunburnt, round face appeared,

crowned by a battered old sailor-hat, and under the face, clasped in two hands, was a huge nosegay of heather and honeysuckle, and bang, bang, bumping against the stairs, was the bundle in which Peter carried his clothes.

Loo rushed down, picked up the bundle, squeezed Peter, flowers and all, to her heart, and dragged him and his belongings into the kitchen, slamming the door behind her.

'Where is it?' she gasped. 'What have you brought, Pete? Where is it?'

'Where's what?' asked Peter in a dignified sort of voice. He really felt very important, just coming back fresh from the country.

'Why, it!' panted Loo. 'What I gave you sixpence to buy—what I saved up farthing by farthing to give you. It—where is it? That's its house a-ready for it. Clean—nothing was ever cleaner. Joe Carter gave it to me vesterday, and I cleaned it beautiful this morning; and mother's out, and she won't mind when she sees it in its house. But where is it, Pete? Where is it?'

'I know now,' said Peter, sitting down and panting. 'You frightened me a bit just for a second, but I know now. Yes, of course. I bought it; it's lovely. I bought it first thing when I went down to the country; I was so feared of spending the farthings. Mary Holland has it; I gave it to her to keep.'

'Oh, why didn't you bring it home?' said Loo.
'And the house ready and all. And ain't it a beautiful house, Pete?'

'Yes,' said Peter, coming up and gazing intently at the cage; 'it's prime. The country's prime too, Louisa!' he continued. 'Primer nor here!'

He was a very old-fashioned child; no one else in all the world ever called Loo 'Louisa,' but he did now and then, when something moved him very much. He was moved now, and tears filled his big gray eyes.

'You want your dinner,' said Loo in her practical way. 'Set right down, and look at the cage, and tell me what it's like, and I'll fetch your dinner out of the oven. It's a beautiful dinner—suetpudding with treacle. See, ain't it piping hot? You eat it up, and tell me what it's like. I hope it's a dove. I do pine for a dove!'

Loo seated herself on a three-legged stool. Her dark hair was all tumbled about her face. She looked from Peter to the cage, and from the cage to Peter.

'I pines for a dove,' she repeated, with a sort of fierce emphasis.

'Well, it ain't a dove,' said Peter, 'and it won't want no perches.' He laughed a little, and rocked himself from side to side, in the ecstasy of watching Loo's eager face. 'You guess what it is,' he said, popping a piece of the suet-pudding into his mouth as he spoke.

'It ain't a dove, and it won't want perches,' said Loo. 'It ain't a squir'l, perhaps?'

'No, it ain't a squir'l. Guess again.'

'I can't guess, Pete; I really can't. Tell us—do tell us!'

'Well, it's a bunny,' said Peter. 'It's big and fat, and one side of it is black, and the other white, and it has hanging ears, and it eats a power.'

'My word, a rabbit!' exclaimed Loo. 'I didn't think you'd go for to buy a rabbit; they are messy sort of things.'

'This ain't; it's beautiful. You see it wash its face. It sets straight up and washes it, and looks at you, and then sniffs about a bit, and then sets and washes again. Mary Holland has christened it "Paul Pry;" do you think that's a good name for it, Loo?'

'No, I don't,' said Loo abruptly. 'Mary Holland hasn't a grain of sense in the whole of her.

What has a rabbit got to do with a name like that?'

'You wait till you see it. It's the cunningest bunny you ever set eyes on. It's lovely and soft. It sets in my lap, and I stroke it and stroke it, and it's more comforting nor nothing you ever felt. And then it sets up and washes itself; only it eats a power.'

Loo rose slowly to her feet. 'I can't think why you didn't bring it back with you,' she said in a pettish voice. 'It's bought now, and we must make the best of it, but "Paul Pry" is a silly name for a rabbit, and if it eats a power I don't know what mother will say to it. Why didn't you bring it along with you, Pete? Why did you leave it with Mary Holland?'

'She said she'd keep it for me, and that we could come and fetch it whenever we like.'

'Well, we can't go now, for I must get back to school. I'm sorry you didn't bring it along with you.'

Peter looked sad for a moment. 'I'm sorry I didn't,' he said in a regretful little voice.

The tone of sadness smote instantly on Loo's motherly-sisterly heart. 'Never mind, never mind,' she said; 'it will be prime fun fetching it when

I come back from school. We'll run straight to the Hollands', and bring it back with us. I guessed that Mary would be coming over you with her masterful ways, but I'm her match; there's no fear of her keeping the bunny when I'm there!'

'No, not a bit of fear. You are wonderful and brave, Loo,' said Peter, with a chuckle.

'Course; how could I manage a mite like you if I wasn't?'

'But Mary Holland says,' interrupted Peter, a flush coming into his pretty, delicate little face, 'that I—I ought to learn'——

'Don't you tell me what she says. I'll punch her head if she comes interfering between you and me. There, now, you've gone and worried yourself, and you have lost the pretty colour you had when you came in. You sit quiet till I come back, Pete. You may look at the cage, and you may unpack your bundle if you please, and you may look out of the window; and I'll be back as soon after four as ever I can, and then we'll go and fetch the bunny. My word! I'm sorry you chose a bunny, for how we're to get food for a rampageous sort of thing like that is more than I can tell; but I suppose Joe Carter can help us,'

'Yes, yes,' said Peter, clapping his hands. 'Oh Loo! you wait until you see Paul Pry a-washing of himself! It'll melt you, Loo. You never saw anything more melting in your life.'

'Well, I must be off now,' said Loo. 'Good-bye.'
She had reached the door when Peter called after her, 'I say, you're not going to lock me in?'

Loo stared in some wonder. 'I always lock you in,' she said. She looked hard at Peter as she spoke. He seemed to have changed somehow. He had a new sort of sturdy, independent air. He got down from his chair and stood facing her, his little legs rather far apart. Loo felt certain he was on the point of saying something about Mary Holland. A fierce hatred to Mary swelled up in her heart.

'Do you think you can take care of yourself?' she said angrily.

'Of course I can. I hate being locked in. I'm not a baby!'

'Well, then, there's the key; take care of it now you've got it. Don't let nobody in, and expect me back when the clock's gone ten minutes past four.'

Loo vanished, and Peter was alone.

CHAPTER III.

A BRAVE SOLDIER.

ETER clasped the big door-key in his hand, and laughed gleefully.

'Mary shan't twit me about Loo,' he said to himself. 'I love Loo better than all the world—yes, better than all, all the world; but I'm not a baby, and I won't be treated like a baby. Why, I'm eight, I am, really, truly! I've been to the country, and I've picked flowers, and seen the doves and the squir'ls and the little fieldmice; and I've got a bunny of my own—a bunny that's called "Paul Pry," and washes itself lovely. I had a birfday when I was away, and I'm eight. Loo forgets that. Now, let's see: I'm a big boy, and I'm home again, and I've a bunny of my very, very own. Won't Loo love Paul Pry when she sees him! He's a darling; he's the most comforblest thing that any one ever had in their arms. He's so soft and so warm, and when he sits up and washes his face it's as good as a story. I Peter

wish I had brought him straight back with me. But Mary and me, we thought maybe mother would be in. Mary said 'twas best for her to keep the bunny till Loo knew about it. And now I know that Loo is angry. She don't say it, but I know it. Poor Loo! dear Loo! but she mustn't treat me as a baby. I'm not a baby; I'm a boy, and boys shouldn't be trod on by girls—no, that they shouldn't. I'm eight; I'm a big boy. I'm glad I've got the key. Mary did laugh when she heard that Loo locked me in when she went out. Mary said that I wouldn't be brave enough to ask Loo not to lock me up, but I am—yes, I am; I'm a big boy, not a baby.'

Peter began to walk about the little kitchen in absolute content with himself. He threw back his head and pretended that he was marching. He even began to hum a hymn-tune which the children used to sing in the country—'Onward, Christian Soldiers.' He liked to think of himself as a Christian soldier. He strutted faster than ever, and puffed out his chest and drew in his chin. He was a Christian soldier, and perhaps he was a pilgrim too. Mary had read him a book while he was away. It was an old-fashioned book with a musty cover, but it told a wonderful tale. Mary said

that perhaps the tale was true. She wasn't quite sure; she only said 'perhaps.'

'Perhaps it's true, Pete,' she had said, looking into the little fellow's face.

But Peter knew no 'perhaps' at all in the matter. The book was true; the story was a real story; the pilgrim was a real pilgrim. He had a burden on his back, and he looked for a gate which the book called the 'Wicket-Gate,' and there was a straight path on which he walked, and there was a Mr Interpreter and a Palace Beautiful, and by-and-by there was a Celestial City. As Peter listened to this story his heart beat high, and he made up his mind that some day he would go on a pilgrimage for himself.

It would be very nice and jolly to be a pilgrim, and to ask Mr Interpreter a lot of questions. Pete guessed that pilgrims were brave people—as brave as Christian soldiers.

He began to sing the hymn again, beating martial time with his hands and feet as he did so.

'I wish Paul Pry were here to see me,' he murmured. 'I'm a very fine soldier.

'Onward, Christian soldiers, Marching as to war,'

he sang out in his piping voice,

'I wish Paul Pry were here to see me,' he continued, 'and Mary Holland, and Loo. Wouldn't Loo be s'prised? "Onward, Christian soldiers." Yes, I'm a soldier and a pilgrim; there's no baby about me.'

He became tired presently of strutting and singing to himself, and went back to the table to gaze at Paul Pry's home. Then he looked at the key, which lay on the table beside the cage. Then his eyes wandered to the door. He put his small hand on the key and felt intensely satisfied—in short, quite master of the situation.

Suddenly an idea darted into his little brain. He looked up at the clock, which ticked serenely on the wall over the little stove. The hands of the clock pointed to a quarter to three. Loo had only been absent three-quarters of an hour; she would not be back for a long time yet—for a long, long, weary time. Peter yawned, sighed, and then a daring idea came to tempt him. It was really very dull being here all alone. There was not much fun in marching about and being a Christian soldier if no one saw him. Even if Paul Pry were here it would be better than nothing. Yes, yes, that was the daring idea—that was the daring, delightful, delicious temptation,

Why shouldn't Paul Pry be here? Why should he wait for Loo? Why should he not go and fetch Paul Pry at once? He could do it, of course, for he had the key; he was the master of the house, and he could go in and out exactly as he pleased. Why should he not do it? How lovely, how delicious if, when Loo came back, Paul Pry were to sit in his new house, and wash his face, and look at her! Peter could see in imagination the picture Loo would make when she saw this lovely and unexpected sight. How her black eyes would dance! How her lips would form themselves into a round, round 'O'! How she would exclaim at last with a burst of delight, and fall on her knees before the cage and kiss Pete, and call Paul Pry the dearest, the sweetest animal that had ever lived!

Peter's little heart beat as he saw this picture. His fortnight in the country had put a great deal of spirit into him. The gallant spirit which filled his breast must surely carry him safely through his little adventure. Yes, he would go at once and fetch the bunny home.

He popped his sailor-hat once more on the back of his curly head, and, going on tiptoe to the door, opened it. He held the key in his hand. When he had got to the outside of the door he shut it softly behind him and slipped the key into the lock, and with some effort, and a good deal of colour coming into his cheeks, managed to lock it. The key was then put into his trousers pocket, and, feeling bigger and more important than ever, he went downstairs.

Almost all the children were at school. Pincher's Buildings seemed quite quiet and deserted. No one noticed Peter as he went downstairs. His colour came and went for a moment when he found himself in the street. Then he turned resolutely in the direction where he believed Mary Holland to live. In addition to the delight of bringing back Paul Pry, this bold step of his would prove to Loo once for all what a very manly, independent sort of boy her brother had become.

What Pete was doing would have been thought very little of at his age by many children in his class of life, but the boy had been sadly delicate from his birth, and had always been nursed, coddled, and fussed over, and, as it so happened, had never really gone out in London by himself.

He was doing a braver thing, therefore, than he had any idea of, and certainly a more dangerous one.

Mary Holland had been very kind to the little boy while he was in the country. She was a downright, solid sort of girl; not at all like poor Loo, who was all impetuosity and fire, but a very good sort of girl in her way. She had thought Peter a great baby, and had made some efforts to induce him to become more manly, never guessing what an enemy she was making of Loo by interfering with him. Mary had helped Pete to choose Paul Pry, and had taken care of the little boy when they were in the country. She had brought the rabbit up to town in her arms, and had taken it straight to her own poor home, which was not nearly such a good home as Peter's, but where she knew she could do pretty much as she pleased.

Only one thing was clear in Peter's mind about Mary—she lived in Stuart Buildings. He had not an idea where Stuart Buildings were, but he had a kind of shady notion that if he walked down a long street where Loo and his mother used to market he would find Stuart Buildings. That name at least was rooted firmly in his little brain, for he had asked Mary so often to tell him Paul Pry's address in order that he and Loo should know exactly where to come and fetch him.

'Stuart Buildings,' Mary Holland would reply; '4 T Stuart Buildings.' Well, he was going there now. He walked quickly and bravely at first, for no one paid any attention to him. There were heaps of children about, and a shabbily dressed little boy in a sailor-suit was not at all a remarkable sight; but when he had got half-way down the long street, and saw other streets branching out from it left and right, he became a good deal perplexed, and for the first time almost wished he had not started off alone to fetch Paul Pry.

He stood still at one crossing, undecided whether to go backward or forward. In this moment of indecision a woman with a big basket on her arm pushed roughly against him and knocked him down.

Peter was no sooner down than he was picked up again. A tall, good-natured policeman had set him on his feet, and was brushing some of the dirt from his trousers.

'Why, there, you have knocked a key out of your pocket,' he said.

'Thank you, sir,' replied Peter, who would not cry for the world, but who had a lump in his throat all the same. 'That's the key of mother's rooms, thank you, sir.'

'Well, put it back into your pocket, and take

care of it, little man,' said the policeman. 'And don't stand staring about you in the street, or you may get knocked over a second time.'

'Please, sir,' said Peter, raising his gray eyes and speaking with frank childishness, 'I'm fetching Paul Pry home, but I don't quite know the way to Stuart Buildings.'

'Stuart Buildings?' said the policeman. 'You're going quite out of your beat, my little fellow; here, come along with me, and I'll show them to you.'

He lowered a great hand as he spoke, and allowed Peter to clutch one of his fingers.

They turned back up the street with its tempting shops, until at last the policeman stopped, and showed Peter an archway at the end of an alley.

'You go through that archway,' he said, 'and there's Stuart Buildings. Now, be sure you don't drop your mother's key a second time.'

CHAPTER IV.

PAUL PRY IN THE LONDON STREETS.



ETER was quite happy now. He ran gleefully down the rather narrow alley, popped quickly under the archway, and found himself in a small court, with tall

buildings all round.

'Stuart Buildings' was written up in large characters outside the archway, but Peter saw no name inside the court, and felt more puzzled than ever how to find the Hollands.

'Stuart Buildings, 4 T,' he murmured to himself. Where in the world was 4 T?

A woman with a basket of newly washed clothes on her head was coming across the court. She saw Peter, but his appearance did not strike her as anything in the least remarkable. At the best of times his sailor-suit looked worn and common, and now it was muddy from his fall, and there was a streak of mud across his cheek and forehead as well.

But if the woman took no notice of Peter, he



'Please, I've come for Paul Pry, and where is 4 T?'
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gazed at her with careful attention. There are women who snub children and women who bless them. This stout, rather ungainly, middle-aged person, with her heavy basket of clothes poised on her head, seemed to Peter to belong to the latter order.

He bounded towards her, and asked her an eager question.

'Please, I've come for Paul Pry, and where is 4 T?'

'Bless the child!' exclaimed the woman, stopping and gazing down at the little fellow. 'You've come for Paul Pry, you say. You can't mean that nasty, devouring, nibbling rabbit that Mary has brought back with her? Why, you ain't—you surely ain't little Pete Rankin, are you?'

'Yes, I am,' said Peter, nodding brightly; 'yes, I am.'

He felt himself a very distinguished little boy, and drew himself up to look as tall as possible.

'Well, now, to think of it!' said the woman. 'Why, I live at 4 T. I'm Mary's mother; my name is Holland.'

'Oh, how delighted I am!' said Peter. 'You'll tell me how to get to 4 T, won't you?'

'I can't go back with you, child, for I've to carry

these clothes to Mrs Podgers's to be mangled. But you can't mistake 4 T. There's the house just opposite, and you go up the stairs until you come to the third floor; then you'll see the letters 4 T painted in white on the door. I don't think there's anybody in, for Mary's gone to have a gossip with a neighbour, and the little uns are at school. But all you have to do is to turn the handle and walk in, and you'll find Paul Pry in a bandbox by the stove; and I'll be right glad if you'll take him off, and out of my sight. He's the most mischeevous beast I ever came across in my life, and has nibbled the toes out of Sandy's Sunday socks, and bit a great piece from the tail of my dress just when my back was turned. You take him off with you, little man, and I'll tell Mary that you came and fetched him while she was out. There, you can't mistake the house—just opposite.'

The woman nodded emphatically, and Peter, without a moment's hesitation, obeyed her directions. He crossed the court and entered the opposite house, and went up to the third floor. There he saw the letter T and the figure 4 staring at him in white on the dark-green door. Still obeying instructions, he turned the handle and went in.

His heart was swelling with anger, and that

helped to keep his courage up. Mary's mother, Mrs Holland, had spoken very unkindly of Paul Pry. She had not been smitten with the charms of that animal. She had tied up the darling creature in a bandbox, where he could not even wash his face in comfort. She was angry because Paul had bitten a hole in a stupid stocking. Oh, it was dreadful, dreadful! But brave Peter had come to the rescue, and Paul's sufferings would be quickly at an end.

It was not difficult for the little boy to find the bandbox, for the rabbit was making a rustling, indignant sound inside. In a moment Peter had untied the string, and out bounded Paul Pry. He hopped away a pace or two, and then sat up and washed himself.

'Oh, the darling pet, he's too sweet for anything!' exclaimed Peter. 'Oh, won't Loo love him just! Come, Paul; come, Paul Pry! Come home with me, you pet!'

Peter held out his arms to Paul, but Paul was not anxious to be caught. He bounded round and round the kitchen, and in the chase which followed knocked down several things. At last, however, Peter secured his prize, and tucking him tightly under one of his arms, went off in high delight and triumph,

He forgot to shut Mrs Holland's door; he forgot everything in his joy at having secured his own pet, darling animal.

Now, Paul was a strong, well-grown rabbit, and Peter was a rather weak little boy. Paul was not grateful to Peter, nor did he enjoy being squeezed up very tight in Peter's arms. As soon as ever they got into the court, therefore, he began to struggle to get free. Peter found him not only a heavy weight, but he also quickly discovered that it was as much as ever he could do to hold him at all.

Squeezing the rabbit more tightly than ever, he managed to pass the archway, walk up the small alley, and find himself once again in the gay thoroughfare where he had parted from the policeman. So far all was well. It is true that Peter's face was scarlet, and his sailor-hat was knocked right back on his neck; but, alas! his difficulties were only beginning.

Paul had been angry at being kept a close prisoner while he was in the court, but as soon as he got into the crowded street he became not only angry but frightened. In the country where Paul lived there were no sights like those which now met his terrified bunny eyes; only dear little holes,

and comfortable, delicious underground houses, and soft grass to right and left and everywhere. Even then it was dreadful enough when any of those tall things on two legs appeared in sight; but now the whole place swarmed with things on two legs—things both large and small, things that rushed and ran and pushed and jolted. The situation was quite fearful enough to turn the brain of the wisest old patriarch rabbit in the peaceful rabbit village at home.

Peter held Paul tighter than ever. Paul struggled and struggled.

The street was particularly lively at this moment, for troops of children were returning helter-skelter home from school. At last a group of them stopped to examine Peter and his prize.

'I say,' exclaimed one, 'here's a rum little cove.'

'Oh, and a bunny! What a bunny!—Give us a grip of your bunny, young un.'

'No, you shan't touch him! you shan't touch him!' screamed Peter, who became quite angry in his excitement and alarm. 'He's ever so frightened, poor, poor darling! and if you touch him he'll get out of my arms. Oh, please, please don't touch him!'

'What a pretty little dear!' cried another boy in

a taunting voice. 'How long have you been away from your mammy, my love?'

As he spoke he pulled the rabbit's short tail viciously.

This was enough. Paul Pry made a last desperate effort. He was off! He was free! Free with a terrible freedom, but still free. He bounded off the footpath and into the middle of the road. A dray thundered up. Peter saw nothing but the danger to his favourite. With a piercing cry he rushed into the street. A girl's voice shrieked to him to keep back; a man thundered something in his ears. What did he care for their words! Paul Prv, his own precious pet animal, was in danger. In a moment those great horses must crush him; he might be dead; he might never more wash his face; Loo might never see him. She had given all her farthings — all — and they might be wasted. Of course Peter would catch him. He was a boy, a Christian soldier; what did he care about drays and big horses and shouting voices! Ah, he felt something soft! Was it Paul Pry? No, it wasn't soft; it was hard; it struck his head. He-What had happened?

'Is there a policeman about?' called a voice. 'Oh, Pete! oh, Pete! don't say you are killed. Oh,

won't a policeman come? Some one fetch a cab; let's take him to the hospital at once. Oh yes, I've got the rabbit! The rabbit ain't hurt a bit. Oh, little Pete! dear, brave, manly little Pete!'

The voice that spoke was Mary Holland's. She had followed Peter quickly when she found that the rabbit was gone, and it was her voice which had shrieked to him not to go under the dray-horse's feet.

CHAPTER V.

PAUL PRY AT HOME.

HE weather had suddenly turned cold—not really cold, but cold for the time of year. The day was Sunday—a wet Sunday. The rain dashed against the window-panes, and the wind whistled through the keyhole of the door.

Mary Holland sat in her mother's little kitchen, close to the stove. She had on her best frock, which was not a particularly tidy one, and the big rabbit, Paul Pry, munched a bit of lettuce in her lap.

No one else was in the kitchen; Mary was alone. She had been half-asleep. Now she started up, shook herself, uttered a sigh, and looked round the room. Her eyes rested on the clock, which ticked on the mantelshelf; then she glanced at the rabbit, which had finished munching its lettuce, and was settling itself down to sleep. Mary's square, firm little hand stroked down the soft fur

gently for a moment; then, with a quick change of attitude, she flung the creature on the floor.

'Hi! get into your basket,' she said. 'I hate you as much as I love you. If it wasn't for you, Peter, little Peter would be'——

'Oh, you're in, Mary! That's a good thing,' cried her mother, who entered the kitchen at this moment. 'You might put the kettle on and give me a cup of tea. I'm just wet through. I never knew such a wet day for the time of year—cold, too, and that windy!'

As Mrs Holland spoke she removed a drippingwet cloak, which she hung up on a peg behind the door, and then, drawing a chair in to the stove, she held her damp boots close to the genial heat.

'Why, I do declare,' she exclaimed suddenly, 'there's that nibbling, rampageous'——

'Oh, don't, mother!' began Mary suddenly.

"Don't, mother"? And why "don't, mother"? Am I to have a great bouncing creature like that in these rooms, a-nibbling up all the green food it can lay hold of, and eating the toes out of the children's stockings as well?"

'The rabbit belongs to poor little Peter, mother, and he—he's so ill.'

'Well, child, I'm sorry enough for the poor little

lad, but that doesn't mean I'm to be eaten out of house and home by a great creature like that. Look at it now, the imperance of it! A-setting close up between me and the fire, and washing of its face!'

'Paul Pry don't mean no harm, mother,' said Mary.

'Now listen to me, Mary. I've humoured you about that rabbit long enough. The rabbit ain't your rabbit, and you ain't to keep it another day. Back it shall go to the Rankins this very afternoon. You drink a cup of tea, and take it there; I can't be bothered with it; no, not for another hour.'

'Very well, mother.'

Mary sighed.

Mrs Holland was a very good-natured woman, but now and then, as the saying is, she put down her foot.

When that broad foot of hers was put firmly down, Mary and all the other little Hollands knew that they might waste words and tempers as much as they pleased, but that nothing would make their mother change her mind.

When tea was over, therefore, the little girl put on her cloak and hat, and, picking up the rabbit, took it out without a word.

In one way she was not sorry to do so; she was

not sorry for any excuse to go and find out from Loo and Mrs Rankin all about Peter. Loo, of course, would snub her furiously, but Mrs Rankin might be good-natured; anyhow, she would hear the latest news of little Peter.

Mary was a very plain, matter-of-fact sort of child; she was blessed with a great number of brothers and sisters of her own, and, although she loved them in a rough, good-humoured sort of way, she did not give them the sort of passionate adoration which she gave to pretty, delicate little Peter. Peter had been put in her care when they went to the country. He had managed to win her heart. He was a dreamy, imaginative sort of child, quite different from any other child Mary had ever come across; he had pretty fancies and bright thoughts and quaint conceits. It had amused Mary to listen to him. He had, in short, opened up a new world to her. There was something Somewhere, beyond the dry routine of her life—something better, she scarcely knew what; she seemed to read about it in Peter's dark-gray eyes. She loved him as she had never loved anything else in all the world. Now that he was ill, and that his life was in danger, she thought of him day and night.

Walking quickly, she soon reached Pincher's

Buildings. Paul Pry had no chance of escaping out of Mary's strong arms.

She mounted the stairs, and knocked at the door of Mrs Rankin's neat little flat. It was opened after a moment's hesitation by Loo.

'Well, what do you want?' asked Loo in a fierce voice.

'I've brought the rabbit,' said Mary. 'Mother says she won't keep it, not another hour. She says it's that troublesome and'——

'Who cares what she says? Give it to me. I've got its house ready for it. Here, give it to me.'

'May I come in for a minute or two, Loo?'

'I can't keep you out; but I don't want you, so you'd best know it.'

'I'm sorry,' said Mary. 'But I'd be glad to sit down for a minute. I've wiped my feet, so they won't mess your clean floor. How's Pete, Loo?'

'I dunno.'

'But don't you really? Ain't he any better?'

'I can't say nothing. Mother's gone to the hospital. She'll be back by-and-by. You can ask her if you want to.'

'Oh, Loo! may I stay till your mother comes back? How good of you!'

'I ain't good. I don't want you to stay.'

'But I may stay?'

'I suppose you will stay whether I like it or not. Here's Paul Pry's house; what do you think on it?'

'I never saw nothing so lovely before in the whole course of my life,' replied Mary. 'Let's see him in it, Loo.'

Loo opened the door of the cage; the rabbit bounded in. He was very large for his house. He seemed to fill it up, and look like a giant rabbit in it. When he sat upright he nearly reached the roof. When he turned round he knocked himself against the sides. Loo placed the cage on the centre of the table in the pretty, spotless kitchen. She was delighted to have the rabbit, but, at the same time, she could scarcely bear the sight. She turned away with fierce tears in her eyes. She hoped Paul Pry would not begin to wash himself.

Mary sat on the edge of a chair, a mingling of contentment and almost timidity on her face. She was very much obliged to Loo for allowing her to stay until Mrs Rankin came home. She felt very solemn, and almost happy. She would soon hear the very latest news of Peter, and now that Loo had taken possession of the rabbit a load was lifted from her mind.

'Don't he look beautiful in his house?' she said. 'He'll want heaps and heaps to eat, Loo; lots of green things and'——

'I don't want you to tell me,' said Loo.

Her little sallow face looked cross; her voice had almost the snarl of an angry dog in its tone. She turned and walked abruptly to one of the windows. From where Mary sat she could only see Loo's profile. At that moment, however, Mary was blessed with insight. She guessed why Loo was crosser than she had ever been before—why she found it almost unbearable to be civil.

'We are both mis'rible about the same thing,' she said to herself. 'I love Peter, and my heart's fit to burst to think as he's in danger; but Loo loves him more than me—much more. I'm sorry for Loo; I don't mind her being cross.'

At that moment heavy, rather tired steps were heard on the stone stairs outside. Loo flew to the door, flung it open, and Mrs Rankin came in.

'Well,' she said, with a sort of gasp for breath, for the stairs were steep at Pincher's Buildings—'well, he ain't a bit better—not a bit. Why, whatever's that on the table?'

CHAPTER VI

PAUL PRY GOES VISITING.

H, never mind now, mother, said Loo; 'it's only—only—the—the rabbit.'

'What rabbit, child? My, how those stairs do take the breath out of a body!'

'The—the rabbit—Paul Pry; Peter's rabbit. Do go on and tell us all about him. Don't mind that rabbit for the present.'

'You're so fierce, Loo,' said Mrs Rankin, with a sigh; 'and fierceness never mended matters yet as far as I can tell.—Oh, is that you, Mary Holland? I didn't see you at first. How are you, my dear; and how's your mother?'

'If you answer one word, Mary Holland, I'll push you out of the door,' said Loo.—'Now then, mother, not another word on any subject but the one. How's Peter?'

'No better, child.'

Loo went down on her knees in front of her mother. She clutched Mrs Rankin's hands in her

own thin, wiry little fingers. When Mrs Rankin said that Peter was no better she tightened her grip.

'Ain't he a bit better?' she continued. 'Not the least little bit? It's nearly a week to-day.'

'No, he ain't better, Loo; and you must bear it patient, and not go off in your terrible tantrums. The child ain't better, and the doctors and nurses don't think well on him. He looks queer and white. He didn't know me when I went first to-day.'

'Not know you, mother?' Loo had never in her wildest moments imagined illness like this.

'No, he didn't; but he talked a lot. I don't know where he got the nonsense that his head was full of. He talked of soldiers and marching, and of pilgrims and pilgrimages, and the Wicked Gate—whatever place in the world he meant. He was real mad to find it, anyhow, and he asked a man he called Mr Interpreter to show it to him. My word! I never heard such nonsense out of a child's lips afore; and—— Whatever is the matter, Mary Holland? Are you going off into a tantrum too?'

'No, I ain't,' said Mary in her stolid voice; but I can explain about that. It's the *Pilgrim's Progress*.'

'Sakes! whatever do you mean, child?'

'Oh, it's a book we was reading in the country. Don't you know it, ma'am? It's real beautiful. It's all about Christian, and he had a bundle of sins on his back as big as—— Oh, you must know it, Mrs Rankin, ma'am; and you must know it, Loo! The woman in the cottage where we lived had it, and I used to read it to Peter, and Peter was mighty took up with it. He used to explain it to me; he seemed to be able to see right into it, and he'd say wonderful, beautiful things about it. He'd say, with his eyes a-shining, "Let's go, Mary; let's go—let's find the Wicket-Gate."

'And a mighty bad sort of gate it would be when it was found,' said Mrs Rankin, rising suddenly. 'The Wicked Gate, indeed! What sort of book is that, to encourage poor children to go in for wickedness? Ain't they full enough of it as it is? No, I never heard tell on the book—never; and I'm very little obliged to you, Mary Holland, for filling that innocent child's head with nonsense.'

'It wasn't nonsense, it was beautiful; you don't understand,' said Mary.

'Well, maybe you'll be going back to your

mother now. I have a deal to think on, and can't stand no worrits.'

Mary moved unwillingly towards the door; her face looked very gloomy; her heart ached badly; she loved Peter so very much, but it seemed she had no right to love him.

Just as she reached the door Mrs Rankin called after her. 'I was near forgetting,' she said; 'I've a message for you, child. Jest afore I went away Peter seemed to turn quite collected and sensible, and he said, said he, "Mother, is that you?"

- "Yes, to be sure it is, sonny," said I.
- "Mother," he says, "stoop down."
- 'So I stooped down and kissed him; his little lips were like fire.
 - "Oh, mother," he said, "I want Paul Pry."
 - 'I looked up at the nurse when he said that.
- "He's wandering again, for certain," I said to her.
- "Oh no, he ain't," she says; "he's often like that."
 - "I want Paul Pry, mother," said Peter.
- "Very well, pet," I said, to humour him, though I didn't know from Adam what the poor child was driving at.
 - "And I want Loo, mother; I want Loo."

Loo gave a fierce start when her mother said that. "Tell Loo to come to me," he said, "and let her bring Paul Pry. And tell Mary Holland to come, for she knows all about the Wicked Gate, and maybe she has seen Mr Interpreter. I want Paul Pry, and I want Loo, and I want Mary Holland. I'm a soldier; I'm marching as to war. I want Paul Pry, and—and Mr Interpreter."

'Well, it was all a muddle,' continued Mrs Rankin, rising suddenly, and wiping the tears from her eyes; but the nurse said there was some sort of sense at the back of it, and that the child had best be humoured. You'd better go right away to the hospital, girls—there's time enough; but what on earth he means by Paul Pry and that other rubbidge is past my understanding.'

'Here's Paul Pry, mother!' said Loo. She walked straight to the table, and straight to the cage, where the large rabbit sat upright.

'That horrid creature!' exclaimed Mrs Rankin.
'I hates rabbits more than anything almost.'

'It's the way with all mothers,' said Mary, with a deep sigh. 'My mother can stand anything almost, but she can't abide a poor bunny.'

'Well, this is Paul Pry,' said Loo. 'If we're to go, we'd better go. Are you ready, Mary?'

'Yes, I'm ready, Loo. Shall I carry the cage for you?'

'No; don't touch nor meddle with it.'

'Loo, you ain't never going to take that horrid animal into the hospital?' called out Mrs Rankin.

'He's Paul Pry; Peter wants him,' cried Loo. 'Come on, Mary.'

The two girls went downstairs. Loo carried the cage. The rain had now ceased, and there was a gleam of sunshine in the sky. Loo walked steadily on in front; she was past all words. Mary plodded patiently behind her. Notwithstanding Loo's rudeness and misery, Mary felt quite uplifted out of her ordinary life. No matter anything now; no matter any rudeness, any rough words. Peter loved her; he loved her well enough to send for her when he was ill, very ill, with his life in danger. Darling Peter! He coupled her name with Loo's; he sent for them both. Even though Loo hated her, they were both going together to Peter.

'Look here, Loo,' said Mary, speaking suddenly in her shrill tones to the little figure who marched steadily on in front.

'Yes,' said Loo; 'what is it?' But she still walked on.

'What will you do with Paul Pry, Loo? You

know your mother can't a-bear him. She won't let him stay in the house. I know she won't, and my mother won't let me have him neither.'

'I don't want neither you nor your mother to have him. Do stop talking.'

'But how will you manage? Will you take him home again?'

- 'No.'
- 'No? Then whatever will you do?'
- 'Never you mind. Stop talking, can't you?'

Both Stuart Buildings and Pincher's Buildings were situated in a low part of Pimlico; the nearest hospital, therefore, was St George's, and it was in that direction the little girls' steps were now bent. They presently reached the great big pile, mounted the steps, and went in. Mary felt more bewildered than ever, but Loo was very sharp and alert. She stated her name and business, accounted for Paul's presence with a look about her face and a queer sort of rough pathos in her voice which quite went to the heart of the hall porter. The queer little trio were passed from one official to the other, and presently found themselves entering a long, lofty ward, where numbers of children were lying in white beds. Some of the children were very ill, and took no notice of any one; but others were

recovering sufficiently to find their captivity irksome, and to be eagerly looking out for any sort of amusement. At this moment, therefore, a sudden shout of delight arose from many irrepressible little voices, for Paul had taken the opportunity to sit up in the cage and wash himself.

CHAPTER VII.

IN COT FOURTEEN.

eyes. He did not hear the noise the other children were making; he did not see the unexpected sight which filled

them with rapture. The fact is, he was far away in a world of his own. In that world people trod softly and spoke in gentle whispers; and although there was a great deal of confusion, there was no loud noise; and although there was light—plenty of light—there was nothing ugly or terrible. He smiled to himself as he walked apart in this shadowy land, and knew nothing of what was really going on around him.

The sister of the ward came up to where Loo was standing.

'What is your name, little girl, and whom have you come to see?' she asked. 'The visiting hour is over, but if you have a brother or sister here, you may just stay to speak a word or two. Oh! what are

you holding in your hand? A cage with a rabbit in it! We don't allow animals to be brought into the ward.'

'If you please,' said Loo in a stubborn and yet excited voice, 'this here rabbit is called Paul Pry, and he belongs to Peter—our little Peter—and Pete sent a message by mother to say he wanted me and Paul Pry and a girl called Mary Holland—that's her—don't stand so nigh to me, Mary. He wanted us all, and we were to go at once. I'm Loo, please; I'm Peter's sister—the only one as he's got.'

'I think I understand now,' said the nurse. 'Peter —Peter: you must mean the dear little fellow in cot fourteen. Please come with me. Tread softly, both of you; he has been calling out very often for a girl called Loo, and a girl called Mary, and for something else called Paul Pry. I didn't know Paul Pry was a rabbit, but I am anxious to humour the child, for I fear he is very ill.'

The nurse walked up to one of the white beds as she spoke and motioned Loo to come forward. Mary stood in the background. Loo held the cage with the big rabbit in her hand.

Little Peter's eyes were shut, and he was breathing very fast. His face was ashy pale, except where two red spots burnt on his cheeks, and where the colour of fever reddened his parched lips. The long black lashes lay against his cheeks, and smiles kept softly flittering over his little face. The sight of little Pete lying so still and weak and shadowy, so like and yet so unlike his dear little self, had a queer effect upon Loo: her angry feelings died out; her fierce, passionate sorrow melted into tenderness; her pain was hushed to something like peace.

'I don't seem to know him,' she said, dropping on her knees close to the pillow as she spoke. 'Is he asleep, please, nurse?'

'No, not exactly asleep—you may speak to him if you like.'

'Pete—Pete—it's me; it's Loo,' said the girl in a cooing sort of voice, which Mary Holland did not in the least know to be hers. 'Pete, I have come; look up; speak to me, Pete.'

But Peter still lay softly dreaming. Loo's passionate, loving cry never pierced the veil which shut him away from the world.

'Look here, Loo,' said Mary suddenly. 'You open that here cage, and let Paul Pry sit on Peter's pillow; most like that'll rouse him. Anyhow, we can but try it.'

Loo felt inclined to oppose any suggestion of Mary's, but the nurse, who was really anxious to rouse the boy, bent forward and opened the cage door herself. A moment later Paul Pry had bounded out and was washing his face contentedly on the little boy's pillow.

Such a sight had never been seen in the hospital before. All the sick children who were well enough to look clapped their hands and laughed with delight, and the next instant, roused by the soft contact of Paul's warm coat, Peter opened his big gray eyes.

'Why, it's Paul Pry hisself!' he exclaimed. 'Darling Paul Pry! Oh, I am glad!'

He made a great effort to stretch out a weak little hand in order to stroke Paul's soft coat.

Loo caught the little fingers and kissed them passionately.

'Look at me, Pete; I'm Loo,' she said. 'I'm your own sister Loo. Don't you know me, Pete?'

Pete turned and fixed his eyes on her.

'It was prime in that there country,' he said; 'prime—such grass and such flowers; and Mary and me we found the Wicket-Gate, and Mr Interpreter come and showed us things; and we took Paul with us, and—and—oh, is that you, Mary? Is that you?'

Little Peter had been quietly glad to see his sister, but his face became quite excited as it rested

on Mary's stolid figure. She was delighted at the unexpected notice, and fell on her knees by the cot.

'Yes, Pete, I've come,' she said; 'I'm here. I love you, Pete, very, very much.'

'How dare you?' said Loo. 'Don't talk to him no more! He's nothing to you—nothing at all! Don't talk to him no more.—Oh, Peter, ain't you glad to see me?'

'Onward, Christian soldiers,' said little Peter. He shut his eyes. 'Onward, Christian soldiers,' he continued. 'Marching as to war—marching, marching.'

'Come away, little girls,' said the nurse. 'You neither of you do him any good. It is very wrong to quarrel like that and speak in that tone before a sick child.'

The nurse looked angrily at Loo as she spoke. She thrust Paul Pry back into his cage, gave the cage to Loo, and conducted the queer little trio to the door of the ward.

'May we come again?' asked Mary.

'Perhaps; I can't say. You excited him and did him no good. Go now; go at once.'

The children went downstairs, and a moment later found themselves in the street. Mary wondered what Loo would say; she felt afraid of her. If Loo

had been rude and insulting before, what might she not do in her present state of terrible passion and grief? But all Loo really did was to turn a white, woe-begone, old-woman sort of face towards Mary, and say in a dull voice, without a scrap of feeling in it, 'You'd best go home now, Mary. I'll see to Paul Pry; you needn't bother. You'd best go home at once. Good-bye.'

'Oh, Loo, I am so sorry for you!' cried poor Mary, who had in reality a most affectionate heart.

'Never mind,' said Loo. 'It don't matter whether you're sorry or not. Good-bye.'

She turned on her heel as she spoke. Mary stood and watched her until she was out of sight. Loo turned down the first short cut she came to, and found herself in the space of a few minutes in one of the worst and lowest streets in the back parts of Pimlico. There was purpose in her step and resolution in her eyes. Carrying Paul Pry carefully in his cage, utterly disregarding the amused and sometimes rude comments of the passers-by, she entered a court where few policemen would have cared to find themselves. She boldly walked into a tenement-house, and turning to her left, went immediately down some steps to a cellar underground.

She opened the door, giving it a kick with her foot in order to accomplish her purpose. Some men and women, some children, and one or two half-grown boys were sitting and standing about in the cellar. The air of the place was very bad; the walls and floor were dirty. There was very little light in the place; and Loo, standing for a moment in the open door, let in a draught of colder air, and stood out herself in a sort of bold relief.

'Shut the door, do!' growled a voice. 'Whoever are you, little girl, and what do you want?'

'I want Joe Carter,' said Loo. 'Is he here?'

'Oh, my sakes alive! you're wanted, Joe,' called another voice. 'There's a pretty young lady come a-visiting you, Joe; you'd better go and see what she's after.'

This remark provoked a growl, and then a shock of fiery red hair loomed into view, and a great, tall, ungainly boy, with a freckled face and light-blue eyes, tumbled to his feet.

'Who's a-wanting me?' he grumbled. 'Why can't a fellow have his nap out in peace?'

'Who's a-wanting you?' said a tall girl, who was busily engaged devouring a thick hunch of bread and treacle. 'Why, it's a most beautiful, elegant young lady, Joe.'

'It's me; it's Loo,' called Loo from the door of the cellar.

'Oh, Loo, is it?' said Joe. His voice altered; he strode across the cellar quickly, and taking Loo's hand, turned to go up the tumble-down and broken steps of the house with her.

CHAPTER VIII.

PAUL PRY FINDS A NEW FRIEND.

HAT brought you here?' said Joe. 'I told you never to go a-hunting of me out in my private home; I told you it wasn't fit. Look at me, now,

and look at you.'

They were both standing in the daylight at the top of the cellar. Most people would have considered Loo a shabbily dressed and a very poor little girl, but compared to Joe she looked quite elegant and refined. Her black stockings, though coarse, showed no holes anywhere; her little cotton frock was clean, and fitted her fairly well; and the brown straw hat which she wore, pushed back from her forehead, was as neat and simple as hat could be. Loo's eager, dark face, too, though as thin and old and worn as a child's face could possibly be, was perfectly clean.

Joe, on the contrary, was out at elbow and out at knee. He wore broken shoes, without any stockings on his feet. His freckled face was anything but clean, and his fiery crop of hair was a great deal too long. Altogether, he presented an unkempt and half-starved appearance.

'I told you not to come a-bothering of me here,' he said, looking at the girl with a sort of hungry, fierce admiration. 'Why, this place ain't fit for the likes of you; it's full of—it's full of—thieves, and worse. Oh! I say, come out of this; don't let any one see you a-talking to me.'

The boy took her hand again, and the two walked in a great hurry across the little court and down one or two alleys; they stopped presently in a quiet and more respectable locality.

'Now, Loo,' said Joe, 'now, speak up; what is it?'

'Oh, Joe,' said Loo, 'you don't think I'd come if I could help it? I always knew you was dreadful, dreadful poor, but I thought you'd help me, and I'm miserable, and there's no one else—no one else!'

'You know I'd do anything for you,' said Joe roughly; ''tain't that—'tain't that I don't want to have you with me. I'd do anything for you, Loo, and you knows it well. Now, what's up?—and, oh, my sakes! what's that you're a-holding in your hand?'

'Look!' said Loo, lifting up the cage for Joe to inspect.

'My word!' exclaimed the boy, peering into the cage eagerly. 'Why, if 'tain't a bunny; and a beautiful bunny, too! Why, I do believe I'd make fourpence on its skin!'

'If you dare to'- began Loo.

'Dare to!' exclaimed Joe. 'How is a fellow to understand you, Loo, if you don't speak up? What are you carrying a bunny in a cage through the London streets for? And why are you so awful black under the eyes? You've been crying, Loo; now I'm sure you wouldn't cry about a bunny—you ain't that sort, whatever you are.'

'Listen,' said Loo. 'I'm miserable, and I've come to you. I'm miserable about this bunny, and I'm miserable about another matter. Joe, you remember Peter—our little, little Peter, Joe?'

'Course I do. I promised the little chap a white mouse. I ain't forgetting, but I can't nab one however hard I try.'

'You don't suppose he'd touch it if you didn't get it honest?' said Loo in a severe voice. 'Well, I must be quick. Pete has gone nearly mad to have a live pet of his own, and when he went to the country with the Country Holiday Fund along o'

that good-for-nothing Mary Holland and others as might have known better, I give him sixpence that I had put together farthing by farthing to buy something as was alive. What does he do but buy this rabbit, and call it Paul Pry, and give it to Mary Holland to keep for him; and what does he do more but get run over in the streets fetching Paul Pry home; and what does he do now, Joe, but lie a-dying in the hospital 'cause he was hurt so bad, and mother, for all she is his mother, she won't have nothing to do with Paul Pry at home, so I want you to keep him for Peter—to keep him very, very careful for Peter, 'gainst he's well again. Will you, dear Joe—will you?'

'You trust me,' said Joe. 'I'll look after this bunny, don't you fear. The bunny will be safe enough. But didn't you say as Pete was dying, Loo?'

'No, he shan't die-he shan't; I won't let him.'

Loo struggled against her tears; she mastered them presently, and looked up at Joe. The light was beginning to pale; the summer's night was coming on. It was a fine, starlight night; all the clouds and the stormy weather had passed away.

'Pete shan't die,' said Loo. 'Do you believe in God, Joe?'

'I don't know much about Him,' said Joe. 'There's a man as sometimes comes and preaches outside Covent Garden Market, who tells a lot about Him, but somehow I don't listen. To know about God means to be religious, and I've no time, bless you; it's hard enough to get victuals; it's hard enough to earn a bit of living however you does it. Now then, Loo, what is the matter?'

'I won't believe in no God if Peter dies,' said Loo in a desperate sort of voice. 'But he won't die—God is there, . . . and He's good, and He won't let him die. Well, Joe, you'll take the bunny, and you'll give him plenty to eat?'

'I'll do what I can—oh yes, I'll manage somehow. There's always lots of green things thrown out round Covent Garden. Yes, I'll manage—I'll manage.'

'And where'll you keep him? You won't let no one steal him? They do seem to be an awful rough lot in your cellar, and if they really thought they could get fourpence for his coat! Oh, Joe, Joe! Peter does think such a sight on him; why, it was for him he got run over—it was, really and truly.'

'Never mind,' said Joe; 'he's safe enough. I'll fight any one as looks at him, and he shall have lots

and lots to eat. Now come along; it's getting late, and I'll see you home.'

'No; I'd rather go alone.'

'I'll see you home, I tell you. You don't know much if you think it's safe for a girl with a dress like yours to walk alone in this part. Come, let's be quick. We won't take long going to that fine house where you live.'

'To Pincher's Buildings?' said Loo, with a laugh.

'Yes, yes!—a palace I calls it. My word, you are a swell, Loo! Now take my hand and let's run.'

Loo put her thin little hand inside Joe's big and dirty palm. He was a very rough, disreputable-looking fellow, but she had always liked him. There was something about him that seemed to suit her. She was less sharp and hard when in his company. He admired her—he gave her the most genuine and open-eyed admiration—and she liked him back again. These two poor children had in reality little in common, and yet they always had the knack of drawing out the best in each other. Loo felt quite cheered up as she held Joe's hand and ran quickly with him through the streets; she had secured a faithful protector for Paul Pry, and she felt down in her heart a new and strong hope about

little Peter. God was in heaven—He was there—He was good and kind—He would remember Loo—He would not take little Peter away.

The two children reached Pincher's Buildings laughing and out of breath. As they did so, and Loo was preparing to enter the special block where her home was, she was surprised to see her mother coming downstairs in the company of a handsomely dressed lady. The lady wore a silk dress, a velvet mantle, and a very stylish bonnet.

'Well, Mrs Rankin, it's all right, and you'll be round as soon as possible in the morning,' she said.

'Yes, ma'am,' replied Mrs Rankin.

A hansom-cab was standing by the door; the lady got into it. As she did so something rolled from her dress and flashed brilliantly in the lamplight. Quick as thought, Joe sprang forward under the pretence of assisting to shut the hansom doors, and put his huge foot on the shining thing. The next instant it was reposing in his waistcoat pocket. The lady drove away, and Loo and her mother went upstairs together. But Loo's heart was beating heavily once more. What had Joe done?

CHAPTER IX.

THE LOST RING.

ATE on the following evening Loo Rankin, with a softened, pleased, and happy expression on her face, was kneeling by the neat little stove, and toasting bread and

preparing tea for no less a person than Mary Holland. She was very grateful to Mary, who sat in front of the round centre table with her hat off, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes very bright.

'Tell it to me again,' said Loo; 'tell it out bold again. I'll put some hot dripping on this toast, and you don't know how fine it'll taste, and jest a pinch of salt; and do you like your tea well sweetened, Mary?'

'Very sweet,' answered Mary, nodding her head; 'sweet and strong, and with a good dash of milk in it.'

'You shall have it like that, and a big cup full, only do begin and tell it to me all over again.'

'To be sure I will,' said Mary. She leant back

in her chair with extreme contentment. She was naturally a very humble girl, and thought Loo quite a queen beside herself, but now she could not help a little touch of importance getting into her words.

'Well,' she said, 'I went to the hospital, and I said to the porter, "Is this visiting day?" and he said, "No, it ain't!" and I says, "Oh dear, that's a pity!" and I sighs like anything; and when I sighs he looks at me very hard and he says, "Didn't you come along here yesterday with a great big rabbit stuck in a cage?"

"Yes," I says, nodding to him, "and with another girl, sister of the sick little un upstairs."

"Oh dear," he says; "you did make me laugh, to be sure!"

"I don't care whether I made you laugh or not," I says back; "only I'm sorry this ain't visiting day, for I wanted very bad indeed to know how that young un were. You couldn't find out maybe, Mr Porter?" I says, staring at him with my two eyes starting.

"No, no!" he says back; "it would be against the rules. Rules is everything in a hospital, you understand, little girl."

"Is they?" I says, very sad, and I was turning away, when a lady dressed beautiful as a nurse

comes into the office and speaks to the porter. Oh dear, didn't my heart jump! She was the lady you and me saw yesterday, Loo. Rules or no rules, I didn't care; I jest sprang at her, and I says, "How's Peter?—how's little Peter? It ain't visiting day, but I must know—I must know."

"Why," says the lady, "he's ever so much better, if you mean the little boy in number fourteen bed. He took a turn for the better last night, and he's doing beautifully—the little pilgrim, we call him—he does go on so about the Wicket-Gate!"

"You're sure now?" I said. "You're sure he's better?"

"Yes," said the nurse; "he's doing beautifully—beautifully."

'Then I came straight on to tell you, Loo.'

'There's your tea,' said Loo in reply; 'and there's your toast; and if the tea ain't sweet enough, there's brown sugar in that basin. So Peter's better; he has took a turn; he's doing beautiful, beautiful! Mary Holland, I believes with all my heart in the Lord God Almighty.'

'Dear me! of course,' said Mary, in surprise.

'No, no, it ain't of course—God's in heaven; He's good; He's kind; He loves Peter and I love Him. I'll tell Joe some day. There's mother's step on

the stairs; you needn't stir, Mary. Mother'll be right glad to see you.'

Loo sprang to open the door as she spoke, and Mrs Rankin came in, looking pale and weary.

'There, take this basket, child,' she said to Loo; 'there's some broken victuals in it as the cook put up for me. I have had a hard day, and I'm worried to death.—Is that you, Mary Holland?'

'Yes, mother,' interrupted Loo; 'that's Mary Holland drinking her tea. She went to the hospital, mother, and she brings good news—Peter's better; he took a turn last night, and he's doing beautiful, beautiful! Why, mother, ain't you pleased?'

'Yes, I'm pleased, poor little lamb! said Mrs Rankin; 'the Lord will provide somehow, though I can't see how at the present moment. Still, of course, I'm pleased; no mother couldn't but be glad that her child was getting better!'

'Why, mother, what makes you so low? You were ever so pleased this morning. That rich lady, Mrs Reynolds, had given you such a fine job of work, for three whole weeks constant, and you said it would pay the rent for ever so long, and buy coals, and pay the baker's bill. What is the matter, mother?'

Mrs Rankin wiped the tears from her eyes.

'I'm not going to Mrs Reynolds's no more,' she said. 'I'll tell you when Mary Holland has gone.'

At this very broad hint Mary Holland gulped down her tea and hastily stood up. She shook the crumbs of that delicious hot toast and dripping into the grate, and turned to say good-bye.

'Good-bye, Mary,' said Mrs Rankin.

'Good-bye,' said Loo in a cordial voice; 'he's doing beautiful; he's took a turn. Good-bye, Mary!'

The door was locked behind the visitor, and Loo turned to face her mother.

'Now, mother, what is the matter?' she exclaimed.

'It's this, child; it's this! Mrs Reynolds came here last night, and she offered me the work, and said she was ever so pleased that I was willing to take it. She made a great fuss, and said that she was always afraid of charwomen, for she had a lot of valuable things all over the house, and unless they were as honest as the day they shouldn't set foot in Belgrave Mansions. She said she had heard a lot of me, and she thought I'd just suit her; so she gave me the work for three weeks certain, and I was pleased, I can tell you. The wages was better than ordinary, and the cook had orders to give me a big basket of scraps of food every night to take home. I calculated that we'd live on that basket,

Loo, and that our food would cost us nothing. When I went this morning, however, I was sent for at once to speak to Mrs Reynolds. She said she had dropped a valuable diamond ring in my house, and she asked if I had found it. I said, to be sure I hadn't, not so much as a sight of it!

"Well," she said, "I had it on my hand when I went into your house, and when I got into the hansom to drive away it was gone. I must have pulled it off with my glove, and it must have rolled on your floor!"

"I never seen it, ma'am!" said I.

"Well," she says, looking back hard at me, "it must be somewhere in your house. You can go on charing to-day, and you can go back to-night and look for it, and bring it to me either to-night or to-morrow morning. If you bring it back, well and good. If you don't, you needn't return to me no more; so now you understand!"

CHAPTER X.

IN SEARCH OF THE RING.



S Mrs Rankin spoke, Loo, who had been feeling in what she termed 'a beautiful frame of mind,' and whose little heart had been overflowing with love and gratitude,

suddenly felt that same heart creeping down, down, down, until, as she expressed it, 'it reached her boots and stuck there.' All her gay spirits vanished; a leaden weight of care pressed her heavily.

'Why don't you speak, Loo?' said her mother, glancing up at the girl from her own low seat by the fire. 'Haven't you nothing to say?'

'Oh yes, mother. We must find the diamond ring. What's a diamond like, mother? I've never seen one.'

'Once I saw 'em,' said Mrs Rankin. 'I went to Bond Street and stared at 'em in a jeweller's window. They seem to leap up at you like hundreds and hundreds of eyes; and all colours they are. There! they look alive and wicked.'

'Flashes, do they?' said Loo. 'Would a diamond flash in the dark?'

'It would take very little light indeed to make it flash. Why, Loo, you haven't seen the ring? Oh, my heart! if it was only to be found in this room, if I only could take it back to-morrow, why, I'd be safe as anything, that I would!'

'I haven't seen it, mother,' said Loo after a moment's thought. 'Is it likely?' she added. 'Why, if it was the sort of thing you speak of, I'd see it most like in any part of the room.'

No,' said Mrs Rankin; 'it might have rolled into a corner and be hidden out of sight. As soon as ever we've had a cup of tea and a bit of something to eat, we'll turn everything out, just for the chance, Loo.'

'All right,' said Loo stolidly.

Mrs Rankin lay back in her chair and wiped her face. Loo bustled about and prepared a sort of meal between tea and supper. She explored the contents of the basket, and placed a portion of delicious veal and ham pie on the table; then she invited her mother to draw up to partake of the good meal. The pie tasted delicious to Loo, who had seldom or never eaten savoury food of this nature. In spite of herself, her spirits began to

rise again. She guessed, of course, where the ring was. That flash in the darkness the night before had, of course, been made by the ring. If she could only induce Joe to give it back to her all would yet be well; her mother would not lose the excellent piece of work she had just secured, and these savoury and delicious morsels would fall to Loo's share night after night. So with new courage and hope she made a hearty meal, and when the last morsel of pie had vanished and the teapot was drained of its contents, prepared with right goodwill to help her mother in her vain search. She did not dare to give Mrs Rankin the faintest hint about Joe. Had she done so, she knew perfectly well that no entreaties of hers, no cries for pity, would keep her mother back from letting stern justice have its way. Straight to the nearest policestation she would go, dragging Loo with her as a witness, and then poor Joe would be arrested and carried off to prison, and Paul Pry-dear, dear little Peter's Paul Pry-would come to some violent end. Some of those dreadful people in the cellar would find him and put an end to his little life, and sell his warm, white, furry coat for the valuable sum of fourpence. On no account, therefore, would Loo breathe a word of her knowledge. If she could

persuade Joe to give the ring back of his own free-will, she would manage to hide it somewhere in the room, and let her mother imagine that it had really been lost there; if not, why, the nice food and the good situation for her mother must go. Loo's mind was firmly made up on this point. Nothing would induce her to tell what she knew.

Of course, the neat and perfectly kept little sitting-room contained no sign of the lost ring, and Mrs Rankin, weeping and bewailing her sad fate, went to bed and cried herself to sleep.

Loo lay down, as usual, by her mother's side. She was tired, and she soon dropped off to sleep; but it was early, very early in the morning, almost before the day had really dawned, when she woke, crept out of bed as quietly as a mouse, and slipped into the kitchen, in order to dress herself without disturbing her mother.

It would never do for her mother to miss her or to suspect what she was about to do. Mrs Rankin was a sharp woman, and she had never approved of Joe's society for Loo. It had not occurred to her yet to remember that Joe had sprung forward to shut the doors of the hansom for Mrs Reynolds; but any instant the memory might come back to.

her, and she might, in short, put two and two together.

Loo's intention was to go out and question Joe and be home again before her mother was stirring. Joe was always to be found hovering round Covent Garden between the hours of four and five in the morning, and it was there that Loo meant to seek him. It was a good bit of a walk from Pimlico to Covent Garden, but Loo knew many short cuts, and was not at all dismayed at the task she had undertaken.

She dressed herself very quickly, and, carefully oiling the key of the door, slipped it into the lock, turned it without sound, and let herself softly out. A moment later she was flying along the still quiet and peaceful streets. The light was not strong yet, but soon the sun would rise and the world would be full of brightness. The crisp morning air fanned Loo's white cheeks; it made her courage rise and her heart beat with hope. She reached Covent Garden before five o'clock, and began to elbow her way with great cleverness through the crowds of people who were eagerly selling and eagerly buying, and who were all making a great noise and confusion. Joe was not considered a respectable-enough lad to have regular employment at the market, but

there were always odd jobs which a smart boy could undertake, and, as a rule, he managed to earn a few pence, which kept him alive during the day which followed.

On her arrival Loo felt almost in despair and feared she could never find him, but by-and-by her eyes lit with pleasure on his tall, ungainly figure. He was leaning against a post near the flower-market, his eager, bright eyes wandering here, there, and everywhere in search of a job, his tangled, fiery hair looking more like a red mop than ever.

Loo ran up to him at once; she took his hand eagerly. 'I want you, Joe,' she said in a panting sort of voice.

'Why, Loo—Loo Rankin!' exclaimed the boy. He looked down at her with the pleasure which her society always gave him. 'What has brought you here?' he said—'a grand sort of princess like you! My word, Loo, what a colour you have!'

'Oh, never mind about me,' said Loo, who liked to be flattered by Joe all the same. 'I've run all the way from home to speak to you. I want to say something. Where can we go by ourselves?'

'You can speak out here,' said Joe. 'Nobody will listen; they'll all be a sight too busy, I can

tell you. You speak out here, Loo; nobody'll listen. But if—if it's anything about Paul Pry, you needn't fret, little gal; I've made him as tidy and snug as bunny need wish to be, and I'm going to carry off a whole handful of greens for him when I go home. What, Loo, ain't it about Paul Pry? What, then—what?'

'No, no,' said Loo, her lips quivering, 'it ain't about Paul Pry—though you're a dear boy to be so good to him; but it's—oh, Joe, I saw you do it!'

'Saw me do what?' said Joe, in astonishment.

'Put your foot on it and then slip it in your pocket! It flashed out as if it were fire; but I saw you, I saw you! Oh, Joe, give it back to me; give it back to me, Joe!'

'The ring?' said Joe in a whisper. 'You saw me?'.

His face grew neither red nor pale; he did not look at all ashamed of himself.

'Do you see that man over there?' he said, pointing with his finger. 'He's beckoning me for a job. It's twopence—breakfast for us both; I must go to him. You wait here for me; I'll be back very soon.'

CHAPTER XI.

AT COVENT GARDEN MARKET.

her. Crowds of eager people jostled past her, but from where she stood she could still get occasional glimpses of Joe's red head of hair. He was helping a stout, good-humoured-looking man to carry some large pots of flowers—fuchsias, geraniums, and some early chrysanthemums—from one part of the market to another. Loo's heart beat with pleasure as she looked at the gay and brilliant blossoms. From where she stood she had a bird's-eye view of the whole of the flower-market, and the sight fascinated her so much that for a very short time she forgot her troubles. Then Joe came back, having finished his job, and with four dirty-looking pennies in the palm of one of his big hands.

'What do you say to coffee?' he exclaimed. 'Coffee for two and a hunch of bread and jam for each on us? Oh my, won't it be prime? I'm that peckish I don't know what to do.'

'Oh, I don't want any breakfast, really,' said Loo, who knew that she could have some at home, and did not want to touch poor Joe's small earnings. 'It ain't breakfast I've come for. You know what I've come for, Joe Carter. Oh, please, please give me back the ring! I see'd you pick it up, so there's no use for you to go and deny it.'

'I ain't going to,' said Joe; 'but look here, I won't do nothing—I won't talk to you, Loo, nor nothing until I've had some coffee. There's a big hole inside of me, and it must be filled somehow. Come along; you needn't have any unless you like, but I must have a good big drink and a great big filling hunch of bread afore I'm five minutes older.'

As Joe spoke he took Loo's hand roughly and dragged her along with him.

They soon found themselves standing in the midst of an eager, scrambling group round a coffee-stall. Joe secured a large mug, filled up to the brim with strong coffee, which contained plenty of milk and a large proportion of sugar. He also purchased a crusty loaf, which the owner of the coffee-stall obligingly cut in two, buttered quickly, and put together again. With this delicious breakfast he motioned Loo to seat herself on an empty upturned box, and insisted on her taking sips of the hot



'But it was a diamond ring, Joe; very, very valuable.'
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coffee and little mouthfuls from the crusty loaf of bread. She was hungry enough to find it impossible to refuse him, and for a few minutes the two children were silent.

'I'm better now,' said Joe at last, heaving a profound sigh as he drained the last drops of the coffee into his big mouth. 'I'm a sight better now; I can talk now; I can think now; I'm a man again.'

'Then you can answer me,' said Loo eagerly. 'What about the ring? You took it; you know you did.'

'Of course I took it,' said Joe, looking frankly at her. 'I'd be no end of a flat if I didn't. What did it roll in the mud for if it wasn't for me? Of course I took the ring.'

'But it was a diamond ring, Joe; very, very valuable; worth a sight of money.'

'My stars! I'm glad to hear it,' answered the boy. He rubbed his hands delightedly.

'You haven't sold it, have you?' said Loo in a whisper of trembling anxiety.

'Not yet, but I'll get rid of it somehow to-day. There's a Jew fellow that I know that'll buy it of me. I'm glad you told me as them sparkling stones was worth a sight of money. I won't part

with it under a good big sum—perhaps a pound—who can tell? My word, if I'd a pound of my own, I could buy a share in a barrow, and be made for life.'

'No, no, Joe, you couldn't; you'd have no luck, not a bit. You stole that ring; you're a thief, Joe—a thief!'

'Well,' answered Joe, 'I never told you that I wasn't a thief. I ain't ashamed; I must steal to live. I never stole from you, Loo, and I never would, so you needn't preach at me.'

'Well, I'll tell you what,' said Loo; 'if you don't give me back that ring you'll have stole from me, and in the most dreadful, dreadful way. Why, do you know what has happened at home? The lady who lost the ring thinks that mother took it. She had given mother a lovely job of work, and we were to have broken-meat, and mother was to have three shillings a day for ever so long. Oh, she was pleased, I can tell you! She said it would pay the rent, and a bit of a bill we owe for bread, and get in coals for the winter, and when little Peter comes out of hospital we could have made him real snug; but now it's all over—it's all over,' continued Loo, bursting into sudden tears, 'for the lady thinks as mother took the ring, and she says she's not to

come back no more unless she brings it with her.'

Loo's eager words had not impressed Joe very much, but her sudden tears and the break in her voice terrified him. He was not accustomed to girls who cried. The girls he knew most about fought hard and used bad words, were wicked and rough and terrible in their anger when anything roused them, and loud in their merriment when anything pleased them. Loo's tears were quite novel and unexpected, and they made him tremble and look downcast, with a sort of fear added to the strange devotion which he gave her. After she had cried for a minute or two in silence, he gently touched her hand.

'Cheer up,' he whispered; 'I haven't sold the ring yet. It's a pity to lose it; it's a mighty fine chance—the best I ever had; but there, do stop crying, Loo. I'll give it back to you; it ain't sold yet. You go home. I can't fetch it this minute, but I will when market is over. I'll bring it to Pincher's Buildings when you comes out of school this morning. There, now, do stop crying.'

Loo dried away her tears immediately. The sunshine flashed out on her face; her lips smiled; her black eyes danced with pleasure.

Peter.

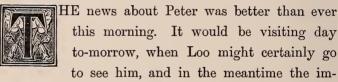
'Oh, Joe, I just love you!' she said. She wrung his hand, and turning aside without another word, set off home as fast as ever she could.

Joe stood and looked after her until she was out of sight; then, with his heart in a glow notwithstanding his injured prospects, he turned back again to the market and devoted himself to all those patrons who were willing to give odd jobs to the hungry-looking but strong and willing lad. It seemed, however, that after Loo went his luck had deserted him. No one had any need of him; no odd jobs came his way. He had eaten up the first fourpence he had earned, and he presently perceived that he was unlikely to get anything more in the way of a job that morning. Secreting, therefore, a raw turnip, which had fallen from one of the stalls, in one of his ragged trousers pockets, and picking up a bundle of green stuff for Paul Pry, he set off home. He had given his word to Loo that he would get the ring and bring it back to her. He was sorry to part with what seemed to be quite a valuable property; nevertheless his word was pledged. He was an accomplished young thief, and in other respects one of the most ignorant boys in London; but nothing would induce him to break the word he had pledged to Loo. Loo had said,

'I just love you.' When she said these simple words Joe's heart had seemed to get up into his mouth, and he had felt for an instant as if something like tears were going to spring to his own eyes and disgrace his manliness for ever. He had managed to keep back the tears; and notwithstanding that he was hungry and without a penny, he laughed to himself as he threaded his way back to the cellar.

CHAPTER XII.

JOE CARTER'S FAULT.



provement in his condition was so marked that he was declared to be quite out of danger. Loo was therefore in the best of spirits. Her mother thought her quite unfeeling as she ate a hearty breakfast, and joked and laughed, and presently started up gaily to put on her hat and collect her books for school.

'You thinks of nothing but that child,' said poor Mrs Rankin; 'you've coddled him shameful, and you'll go on coddling him till the end of the chapter. 'Tisn't as I ain't glad that he's better, sweet lamb; but, better or not, food has to be found and money earned. Where's the rent to come from, and how are the bits of debts to be paid, and where are we to find coal with the winter coming on? It's all very fine to laugh

and joke, Loo, but you might think of my trouble a bit.'

'So I do, mother; so I do,' replied Loo. She rushed up to her mother as she spoke, put her thin arms round her neck, and gave her a sharp little peck of a kiss on the forehead. 'There, mother,' she said, 'I can't stay another minute or I'll be late for school. 'Course I can't help being glad about Peter, but I don't forget you; so don't you think it. You and me, mother, we'll have such a search for that ring after school to-day; there's no saying where it may have rolled itself. We'll search for it again and again until maybe we'll find it. Now good-bye, mother; good-bye.'

Loo ran off, banging the door after her. Mrs Rankin stood and gazed disconsolately round her neat little kitchen. Peter was better—that was a great comfort, of course—but what about the ring? Was that ring really lost? Had some one stolen it? Was it never to be found again, and was she—honest Mrs Rankin, the most respectable and looked-up-to woman in the whole of Pincher's Buildings—to be suspected of theft? The thought was quite unbearable. Not only would the poor woman lose her present excellent job of work, but

the story of the lost ring was sure to leak out somehow, and people would suspect her, and look askance at her; and the neighbours, who had thought so much of her, but who had been sometimes quite annoyed by her proud and stand-off ways, would now have a fine laugh at her. Oh yes, that lost ring would mean Mrs Rankin's ruin. She sat down again and stared helplessly round her. There was nothing much to be done in the beautifully kept little kitchen; it was dreadful to sit like that with her hands before her, and to think of the dark future which she had so unexpectedly to face. Little or no coal in the grate, little or no food in the cupboard, and bit by bit, bit by bit, the nice, neat furniture in which she took such pride, and which she had polished and polished until it shone again, would have to be taken away and sold.

'Yes, it was all very fine for Loo to be in good spirits, but even though dear little Peter was getting well, Mrs Rankin sighed and sighed, and tears rolled down her cheeks as she went slowly about, putting the place into a sort of mournful order.

Meanwhile Loo at school was going triumphantly to the top of her class, and having, in short, a splendid time. At last the recess for dinner came, and the children rushed, as usual, helter-skelter to their different homes.

Joe had promised to meet Loo outside Pincher's Buildings, but she did not want any of her school friends to see him. She was, therefore, shorter and sharper than ever with her special cronies, Rose and Annie Hobson. In short, she made herself so disagreeable that they were quite glad to leave her to herself. When they all reached the Buildings Loo pretended that she had to go on a message for her mother, and turning down a side street, met, as she expected, Joe Carter coming to meet her.

She rushed up to him at once, looked at him affectionately, and said:

'There you are, Joe; and now let's have the ring. See if I'll ever forget you, Joe, for bringing it back to me so beautiful and quick.'

Loo had not yet looked into Joe's face. She caught his hands in hers, quite indifferent to the fact of their being clean or dirty. When she spoke he made no reply, however, and that caused her to start back and glance up at him anxiously.

'Come,' she exclaimed, 'you ain't never gone back

of your word? Here, give us the ring or mother'll wonder why I'm late for dinner. Do be quick, Joe; give us the ring at once.'

'I ain't got it, Loo,' said Joe.

'You ain't got the ring? Well, if you ain't the very meanest'——

'No, no, don't begin that,' said Joe; 'it wasn't my fault. If it was only me you'd have that ring safe enough; but it wasn't me. I came home just after I had done walking round Covent Garden, and I got to the cellar, and I put my hand into the hole in the wall where I had hid the ring, but the ring was gone.'

'Gone!' exclaimed Loo. 'Gone! It must have dropped on the floor.'

'I looked on the floor; I looked everywhere. I lit a candle and I poked about, and there wasn't a sign of it; and then Nancy Hodge, my cousin, she come in, and when she saw me she burst out laughing ever so loud, and said, "Is it that ring you're looking for?" And I said, "What do you know about a ring?" And she said, "Well, you'll never find that ring, for I sold it last night. I found it and I sold it; it was a real beauty. Why, I got two pounds for it!" She threw me a shilling, and I chucked it back at her, and then I came off

to tell you, Loo. The ring's gone, and it ain't my fault.'

'Oh yes, it's your fault,' said Loo slowly; 'it's your fault true enough.'

'What's that you say? Do you go for not to believe me?'

'I believe you right enough, Joe,' said Loo, 'but it's your fault all the same. We're ruined, mother and me and little Peter, and it's you as has done it. You took the ring, you acted a thief, and then you put it away so that some one else should find it. It's all your fault, every bit of it, and I don't love you no more; I don't never want to see you no more.'

Loo turned on her heel as she spoke, and reentered Pincher's Buildings.

All her joy had left her; no little girl could be more depressed and wretched than she. She crept upstairs slowly, and when her mother opened the room door for her, she went in and threw herself on a chair.

'Sakes alive! what is it, Loo?' exclaimed Mrs Rankin. 'Have you heard bad news of Peter?'

'No, mother; I ain't heard anything.'

'Did you get into trouble over your lessons?'

'No, mother; they're all right.'

'I guess they ain't,' exclaimed Mrs Rankin. 'I guess you went to the bottom of your class; you're too pert, Loo, and too sure of yourself. You got into trouble at school; that's why you're so glum.'

'I got to the top of my class, mother; you ask Rosie Hobson.'

'Sakes! what can it be?' exclaimed the widow.
'You were in such spirits this morning as was quite unpleasant, and now you're as black as a coal and as cross as two sticks. Well, come and eat your dinner, anyway.'

Loo drew up her chair to the table.

There was a nice little piece of corned beef on the table, and Mrs Rankin had boiled some mealy potatoes to eat with it. The beef had, of course, come from Mrs Reynolds's larder. As Mrs Rankin ate she said suddenly, 'Be sure you come back from afternoon school in good time, for I've made up my mind to turn out every bit of furniture this evening, and to lift up the floorcloth, just in the hope of finding that ring.'

'Oh, mother! don't,' said Loo; 'it's no manner of use.'

CHAPTER XIII.

A RUNAWAY.

RS RANKIN stared when Loo spoke to her. 'Well,' she said after a pause, 'if you ain't the most aggravating girl in the world. This morning you were all

agog to find the ring; you quite worried me by talking nonsense about its being in this room; and now you've turned crusty the other way, and when I've gone to believe you and made up my mind to move every scrap of the furniture and even the bit of kamptulicon round the edge of the room, which is put down that beautiful as never was, you go and say there's no use in it.'

'There isn't, mother, not a bit; the ring's gone, and we have got to make the best of it. There's no use in upsetting the room; we have got to make the best of it, mother; we'll never find the ring.'

Loo stood up as she spoke. Mrs Rankin gazed at her with a shrewd and yet anxious glance. Loo

was a tall, thin child, all bones and angles; her face was sallow, her eyes big and dark, her mouth somewhat large, her cheeks sunken. She was not pretty by any means, but there was a sort of downright honest look about her, a truthful look which Mrs Rankin well knew the worth of. Loo had many faults, but she had never told a lie, and it would be as impossible for her to steal as it really was for her hard-working mother.

When Mrs Rankin stared now at her little daughter, Loo's big eyes returned her gaze pertly for a moment; then an uneasy expression crept into them; she lowered her lids, looked on the floor, and shuffled with her feet.

This was such a new attitude for the fearless child that Mrs Rankin was at first surprised, then displeased and troubled, and finally a quick suspicion darted into her mind.

'There's but one meaning to this,' she said, springing to her feet with a bounce; 'you know something about that there ring. If you haven't took it yourself, you know who has took it. Now look me full in the face.'

Loo raised her eyes; with a desperate effort she managed to get a bold, fearless expression into them.

'You know about that diamond ring,' continued Mrs Rankin. 'Yes or no, now? If it's a lie you're going to tell, it'll be the first, and your tongue will be blistered with it. Now, is it yes or no?'

'I wish you'd let me be, mother,' said Loo.

'That I won't, when it's my bread, and yours, and little Peter's—bless him—that's depending on a plain answer. Yes or no, Loo—do you know anything about that ring?'

'I can't tell you, mother; you mustn't ask me.'

Loo rushed to the door, but Mrs Rankin was before her.

'Come back this minute, you bad girl!' she exclaimed. 'I have it; I have it. Oh, what a wicked, ungrateful girl you are, Loo Rankin, to keep things back from your own mother! You're concealing something, and I know what you're concealing. I remember now what had clean escaped my mind until the sight of your face brought it back to me this blessed minute. I remember now when Mrs Reynolds was getting into the hansom—— Why, what's the matter with you, girl?'

For Loo had pulled her hand violently out of

her mother's, and had covered her face in a passion of agony and fear.

'Oh, mother! don't—don't say any more,' she sobbed.

'You may be sure I'll say all that's in my mind. That good-for-nothing of a Joe was with you-Joe Carter. I saw you hiding just by the door when the lady was getting into the hansom, and Joe was standing nigh; I know he was, Mrs Reynolds must have dropped the ring just then, and Joe must have picked it up. Ah! that's the truth; I know it by your face, so you needn't go to deny it. I'll have the police on that young scamp fast enough. I'm not going to lose a good berth, and the chance of more work, and my honest name into the bargain, for the sake of a young rascal like that. I'm glad I've got the truth out of you, Loo; and you may be sure this matter shall be in the hands of the police before we're any of us many hours older. Goodness knows if the ring will be found, but, anyhow, we'll have a try for it; and glad I'd be-right glad—to lock that young scamp into prison.'

Loo no longer covered her face. Her mother had guessed all, or nearly all. There was no use in even pretending to shield Joe any longer. Loo had hated Joe Carter a few minutes ago, but now—now that he was in danger, she found that she loved him again. He had no friend but her. Not for worlds would she forsake him.

'You don't mean what you say, mother?' she exclaimed, speaking in quite a shaking voice in her agitation. 'You can't mean to set the police upon poor Joe?'

'Yes, but I can—and will! Oh, the black-hearted scoundrel! It serves me right ever to have allowed you to say a word to him; but I'll punish him for this, see if I don't. Oh, my word! what a fate to happen to a poor, honest, hard-working woman! Now, get off to school with you, Loo, as fast as you can.'

As Mrs Rankin spoke she opened the door, and almost pushed her little daughter out of the room.

Loo stood for a moment irresolute on the stairs; then a quick thought came into her head. Never before had Loo absented herself from school; never had she acted the disgraceful part of a runaway; but on this occasion she felt that school disgrace was nothing at all to the awful feeling which would take possession of her heart were Joe to meet the fate which awaited him, unwarned. Yes, she must go and find him at once; she would tell

him that the police were going to look for him. It was her duty—the only duty which seemed clear at present to her excited and troubled little mind.

Flinging her satchel of books over her shoulder, she ran quickly downstairs. She was joined by other children, also on their way to afternoon school, but she did not take any notice of them. Rose Hobson called after her and asked to be allowed to walk to school with her, but Loo made no reply; with a sudden clever dodge she disappeared down a narrow alley, and was soon running as fast as ever her feet could carry her in the direction of Joe Carter's wretched home.

CHAPTER XIV.

'LITTLE MATEY.'

OO was naturally almost devoid of fear.

She did not mind what dark alleys she rushed down, nor what narrow, dreadfullooking streets she turned into. Some

boys who saw her running shouted after her, 'Go it, young un! Well done, young un!' and some tawdrily dressed rough women and girls threw pieces of orange-peel after her and screamed to know what wager she was going to win. A few children even joined in a sort of pursuit of Loo, and called, 'Stop thief, stop thief!' but the little girl was not to be deterred by any such obstacles. She had been to Joe Carter's home once before; she knew exactly how to reach it again; and no taunts nor cries from any one could keep her back.

At last, panting and out of breath, she reached the house where he lived. It was in a poor street, and the house itself was tumble-down and miserably dirty. Joe's home in the cellar of this house was

Peter.

certainly not an attractive one, but Loo was far too excited to think anything about that now.

A brawny-looking woman with bare arms and a very red face was standing at the entrance to the cellar door, and when she saw Loo she called up to her to know what she wanted.

'You'd better not come down,' said the woman; 'we don't want no strangers in this here place. You tell your business and get out of this as fast as you can.'

The woman looked very angry as she spoke, and when she saw that the little girl was preparing to run down the steps which led to the cellar, she put herself in front of the door and shouted more crossly than ever, 'You'd better tell your business and be quick about it; we don't want the like of you here, whoever you are.'

'I've come to see Joe,' said Loo. 'Is he in?'

'No, he ain't. Are you Loo Rankin?'

'Yes.'

'Well, Joe ain't in, and you'd better get out of this, do you hear? There, don't stand staring at me; go away at once, or I'll throw something at you.'

The woman looked so fierce and determined that Loo turned reluctantly on her heel and began to

walk very slowly down the street. It was absolutely necessary that she should see Joe; it was absolutely necessary that she should warn him of his danger, and that without a minute's delay. She walked slowly therefore, wondering what her next step should be. A ragged boy about Joe's age, and with a twinkling pair of eyes and a freckled face, came up and touched her on the arm.

'Leave me alone,' said Loo angrily.

'I ain't meaning no harm,' whimpered the boy;
'I heard you say as you wanted Joe Carter. Now,
I knows where he is.'

Loo's manner changed instantly.

'Do you really and truly?' she asked. 'And will you take me to him?'

'Yes, if you pays me.'

'Oh, I have no money; there's no use. I can't pay you, boy; so go away, will you, at once!'

The boy reflected for a moment. Loo looked unutterably miserable. He had hoped to get a penny from her, but if she did not possess one, there was no use in being disobliging.

'You can pay me another time,' he said after a pause. 'Come along, and I'll take you to Joe.' He started on in front, then turned his head to see if Loo was obeying. She did so without a word. She had not a particle of fear, although the boy began to lead her down more and more dreadful slums. At last they reached the narrow entrance to a very small court.

- 'You stay here,' said the boy.
- 'No; I'll follow you,' said Loo.

'You'll follow me?' he replied. 'No, you daren't; the place in there ain't fit for you. You stay where you are. I'll bring Joe Carter out in a jiffy. You stand there, and I'll be back in no time.'

He pushed Loo as he spoke against a recess in the wall, and instantly, to her unbounded amazement, began to turn head over heels. In this manner he entered the narrow court and disappeared from view.

Loo pressed herself tighter against the wall. For the first time she did feel a slight sensation of fear. She did not want any one to notice her. The street was certainly dreadful; the entrance to that narrow court looked dark and terrible. She had not an idea how she was ever to get home again. In following the strange boy she had completely lost her bearings. Was Joe really in the court? Was there any chance of her being able to save him after all?

Suddenly a voice sounded in her ears; she raised her eyes, and, with a start of delight, saw Joe's big, hungry face looking eagerly down at her.

'You here, Loo?' he said, with a sort of gasp. 'Why, you said you'd never speak to me again. You here—here! in this awful, awful place! Oh, come away at once—come away this blessed minute!'

Loo never forgot the strong feel of Joe's hand; his fingers closed round hers with the strength of a vice.

'Come, Loo, run for your life!' he gasped. 'Jimmy had no right to bring you here; he had no right; and if I don't pay him out for this, my name ain't Joe Carter. Now I'll run, and you must run too, for your life, Loo—for your life!'

Joe's manner and words could not help adding to Loo's terrors. She ran in good earnest, and in a very few moments the children found themselves safe and sound in a wider and more respectable street.

'Now, what do you want?' said Joe when he had recovered his breath. 'Oh, to think of the danger of you being in that dreadful street!'

'What could they do to me?' asked Loo. 'What's the matter with the street?'

'Matter—matter? There ain't an honest person in that street, I can tell you; but never mind, you're safe now. Oh! ain't it good to see you again, little matey; and you were so mad with me an hour or two back. It drove me desperate, Loo; I couldn't stand it.'

'I'm angry still,' said Loo, 'but I'm not so angry. Oh, Joe, Joe! mother has found out about the ring, and she's going to set the police on you. She knows where you live, and she's going to set the police to hunt you up. You must run away and hide; you mustn't go home no more.'

CHAPTER XV.

LOO TELLS THE TRUTH.

OO'S face was absolutely colourless while she was speaking to Joe. She thought her news so dreadful, and felt in such distress at having to tell it, that her voice shook. Joe, however, took her information coolly enough.

'Lor,' he said, patting her on the shoulder, 'whatever are you trembling about? You don't suppose as I minds the police? No, that I don't. I'm real grateful to you, Loo, for having warned me, and you may be quite sure as I won't go home to-night; but, lor, it ain't nothing! I'll just stay away for a night or two; they won't never catch me. No fear.'

'But where'll you sleep, Joe? Where'll you spend your time?' asked Loo.

'Never you mind that. I know lots of places where I can sleep, and sleep sound, too; there's a railway arch down near the river with a bit of

a ledge two feet above the ground—there's many a fellow has a worse bed than that, I can tell you; and there are other places. Oh, I'll manage fine; but I'm obliged to you all the same, Loo.'

Loo felt quite comforted by Joe's words.

'It was awful to think of you being took,' she said. 'But, oh, Joe, what's to become of Paul Pry if you ain't at home?'

'Paul Pry ain't in that cellar,' said Joe, with twinkling eyes. 'Paul Pry's safe enough. Yes, Paul Pry's all right, and I'm all right; but I'll never forget as long as I live what you've done for me, Loo. And now I'll see you safe back to Pincher's Buildings.'

'Maybe it ain't safe,' said Loo; 'some one may see us together.'

'And what if they do? Lor, I ain't afraid of the police! Take my hand and let's get out at once.'

As they walked along Loo could not help thinking of the lost diamond ring with a sense of great regret.

'It do seem an awful pity as the girl what sold the ring, or took it away from you, Joe, shouldn't be found by the police and locked up and punished,' she said, fixing her eyes anxiously on her companion's face as she spoke.

But in this opinion Joe did not agree with her. He didn't want any one 'took up,' and the ring was gone; there was no use in fretting about it, for it was quite, quite gone, for ever and ever. Loo was the best little mate in the world, and he would never forget what she had done; but there was no use fretting about the ring any more. They had now reached Pincher's Buildings, and, with a hasty nod, the tall boy rushed down a side alley and disappeared.

After a very brief hesitation Loo turned into the building where her mother lived and walked slowly upstairs. She had been too excited to give a thought to the fact that she had played truant and run away from school; but now, as she slowly ascended the stairs, the memory returned to her, and she wondered if she could conceal her conduct from her mother. Her mind was relieved about Joe, but the knowledge that she had behaved badly, that the ring was gone, and that her poor mother might be out of work for the greater part of the winter returned to make her feel very bad and uncomfortable. She opened the door of the little sitting-room and walked in, feeling queer, cross, and defiant. When she looked into her mother's face, she suddenly made up her mind to brave all and tell her the truth.

Mrs Rankin was busy over some washing which she was doing for a neighbour, and the kitchen was full of the steam of hot water.

'Why don't you wash in the scullery, mother?' said Loo in a cross voice.

'I suppose I may wash where I please,' answered Mrs Rankin, taking a dripping-wet garment out of the tub as she spoke and wringing the water out of it with fierce energy. 'Do stand out of my light, Loo. And whatever are you back so early for? Surely school ain't over?'

'I didn't go to afternoon school, mother.'

'You didn't go to afternoon school?' repeated Mrs Rankin. 'What do you mean? You haven't the cheek to stand up there and tell me you played truant?'

Loo's pale face turned red.

'You may call me a truant if you like,' she said. 'Perhaps I did play truant; I don't know for certain. Anyhow, I didn't go to school.'

'What a bad girl you are! I'm ashamed of you,' said Mrs Rankin. 'As if I hadn't trouble enough, too! And may I ask where you did go?'

'Yes, mother, you may. I've made up my mind to tell you.'

'Well, then, speak up, and be quick about it.

I don't want to lose the precious light that's left for my washing, listening to you. Speak up, I say, child.'

- 'I went to warn Joe Carter, mother.'
- 'You went to do what?'

Mrs Rankin raised herself upright now; her arms hung to her sides; her angry eyes were fixed on her little daughter.

'I went to warn Joe Carter,' repeated Loo in a sturdy voice. 'You said you'd set the police on him, and I told him to stay away from home for a few days.'

Whatever Mrs Rankin's reply would have been, her words were suddenly interrupted. There came a hasty knock at the door of the room—such a hasty, imperative knock that Loo ran in some amazement to open it. A messenger from St George's Hospital stood without. He brought a note from the sister of the ward where Peter was lying ill.

'Oh, mother, mother! he ain't worse, surely?' exclaimed Loo, all her naughtiness and everything else swallowed up in the great fear with which the sight of the note filled her. 'Oh, mother, open the letter, quick, quick!'

'Much you deserve to hear it,' answered Mrs Rankin as she wiped her hands on her apron.

'Oh, mother, don't! Do anything to me afterwards, but *please* tell me the news about little Peter.'

Mrs Rankin opened the envelope deliberately. She held the note high, so that Loo had no chance of reading it over her shoulder. 'There, child,' she said after a pause and speaking slowly, 'it's good news, after a fashion.'

'How after a fashion? Oh, what can be the matter?'

'Well, this note is to give me notice that Peter will be well enough to be moved on Saturday, and that I'm to be at the hospital at twelve o'clock to fetch him.'

'Then he's better; he's really better; he's going to get well?'

'Don't the note say so? There, you can read it if you're so keen on the matter. Poor child! I don't know what roof is to cover him when he does come back; but you don't care nothing about that.'

CHAPTER XVI.

THE THIRD TROUBLE.

ATURDAY morning dawned. This was the delightful day when Peter was to return.

Mrs Rankin got up earlier than usual.

She made herself a cup of tea, and went without saving a word to Loo. Loo concluded

out without saying a word to Loo. Loo concluded that her mother would go to the hospital to fetch Peter at the appointed hour, and busied herself in making preparations. It was a holiday at the Board school. The young girl had been feeling very low and depressed all the week, but now her spirits rose high and life seemed once more full of interest. Dear little Peter was the darling of her heart, and he was coming home again; he was better; he was very nearly well. God had been good, very good about Peter, and Loo made up her mind that she ought to return His goodness by trying to be good herself, by being unselfish and industrious, and even patient with her mother, who was inclined to be very cross and severe with her just now.

Mrs Rankin had been true to her word, and the police had been set on Joe's track, but up to the present no trace of the diamond ring had been discovered, and the boy, secure in some hidingplace of his own, had laughed at justice. Loo had seen nothing of Joe since the evening she had warned him, but she had full confidence in his cleverness, and was not at all afraid that he would allow himself to be taken. She had no special anxiety, therefore, on her mind as she made the place bright and pretty for her little brother. She had a couple of treasured pennies in her pocket, which she spent in buying some flowers. These were placed on the centre of the little deal table, and then Loo stood by the window, impatiently waiting for the moment for Peter to arrive. There was an apple-dumpling simmering pleasantly on the fire for the little boy's dinner, and, as the day was really a beautiful one in late autumn, Loo thought that after dinner they might go for a walk as far as Westminster Bridge. Loo and Peter had often stood on Westminster Bridge together, and watched the river as it rolled swiftly by. At these times Peter would make some of his quaint, old man's sort of remarks, and Loo would listen and think him quite the cleverest

and most wonderful boy in the world. He would have a great deal to tell her about the hospital to-day. Altogether she expected to have a very delightful time.

Soon after twelve o'clock there came a knock at the door. Could Peter really have come back so soon? Loo rushed to open it, and was much annoyed to find that Mary Holland stood without.

'You can't come in to-day,' said Loo. 'I'm busy; I've no time to waste.'

'Oh, I don't want to come in if you're really busy,' answered Mary, a wistful expression on her face; 'only I thought that perhaps Peter'——

'Peter ain't home. Do go, Mary; I'm awfully busy.'

'Very well,' answered Mary; 'I know he's coming back to-day, for I went to the hospital yesterday, and I saw him, and he told me.'

'You went to the hospital and you saw Peter?'

'Yes; he's better, but he looked very white and weak. He said he'd like me to come and see him this evening. He begged very hard. He wants to hear more about that book—the *Pilgrim's Progress*. He's awful took up about it.'

'I don't suppose you know anything about it,'

said Loo, 'no more than he does. It ain't your book.'

'I know that, but I read on farther than Peter did. I went a long way past the part about Doubting Castle and Giant Despair.'

'Oh, my word, what an awful book it must be!' exclaimed Loo. 'Giant Despair! We don't want him round, whoever he is. Go now, Mary, do! I really can't waste time chattering to you.'

'I brought a little bag with some sweeties for Peter,' said Mary; 'they're bull's-eyes, and there's a lot of peppermint in them, and they're very good indeed. You pop one in your mouth, Loo, and you'll see how good it tastes. I suppose I may come back to-night, just for five minutes?'

'Oh, what a worrit you are!' exclaimed Loo. 'Well, I suppose you must, just for a minute or two, no more. We don't want the bull's-eyes, though. You hadn't ought to spend your money on us. You're a sight poorer than us.'

Whatever answer Mary might have made to this remark was interrupted by the sound of several steps on the stair, and the next moment Mrs Rankin appeared, accompanied by a cabman, who carried little Peter up in his arms—Little Peter, white as a sheet, transparent as a lily, but still

little Peter himself. Loo forgot everything else in all the world in her joy at this sight; she pushed Mary roughly aside, flew to her little brother, and nearly strangled him with her hot kisses and passionate embraces.

'There, do let the child be,' said Mrs Rankin. 'You're that fierce, Loo, you almost choke a body. Bring him right in here, cabby, and set him down in this chair. There's your shilling, and a penny for bringing him up, and I'm obleeged.—Oh, is that you, Mary Holland? Come right in; you can talk to Peter for a minute or two while I'm busy in the other room with Loo.'

'Mother,' gasped Loo, 'I can't give Peter up to nobody just now.'

'Yes, you can. None of your folly; here, give me your hand.' Mrs Rankin seized Loo's hand and dragged her roughly into the bedroom. Poor Loo had seldom felt in such a passion. Her face became scarlet all over; her eyes blazed. Mrs Rankin sat down on the side of the bed and wiped her pale face. She looked in a kind of despairing way at her daughter.

'You may storm and rave as much as you please,' she said; 'I'm willing to wait till it's all over, then I've something to say.'

Peter, Į

There was something in the tone of Mrs Rankin's tired voice that checked Loo's passion in the most extraordinary and instant manner.

'What is it, mother?' she asked. 'What's the matter with you, mother?'

'I had a letter about it last night,' said Mrs Rankin, 'and it's all true—perfectly true!'

'Oh, mother, what's true? You do look so bad—do speak, mother.'

'Well, child,' said Mrs Rankin, wiping the dew from her hot forehead as she spoke, 'it's just this—they do say that troubles never come single, and mine seem to be arriving pretty thick. There was first the stealing of the ring, and me losing my good post, and being suspected-what's worse -and having it more than likely that I'll find it hard to get work during the short days coming That was bad enough, but added to it I had an unnatural, ungrateful child, what turned against her own mother, and went for to shelter a thief, and to screen him, when her mother wanted to bring him to justice. Them was two big troubles, Loo; but, my word! bad as they were, they were nothing at all to the third. I had a letter about it last night, and I went to find out the truth this morning, and it's true, only too true!'

'What is it, mother? Oh, mother, what can it be?'

'It's this,' said poor Mrs Rankin. 'You know, two years ago, when I was brought to a low pitch, that I borrowed ten pounds from an old mate of your father's. Jim Thompson was his name. He said I might pay it back as I could, and I was hearty welcome to the loan of it for many a year, for he had no call for it, having neither wife nor child belonging to him. Well, he's dead, Loo, and his heirs want the money. I had a lawyer's letter about it, and I went to see the lawver this morning, and he said there is a paper found to prove that I owed it, and they'll sell me up unless I pay it within a week. I can't keep the roof over us, child, any longer; and what's to become of little Peter, and him so weakly, God only knows!'

CHAPTER XVII.

'IS LOO COMING, MOTHER?'

ETER had been at home for nearly a week.

Loo's rapture at having him back was greatly subdued by her mother's trouble.

It was impossible for her fully to realise

it; still, it seemed to be always near her. When she came in from school, there was not only Peter sitting pale and quiet in the room, with his bright eyes and his sweet, patient smile, but there was also this queer and mysterious trouble. Mrs Rankin sighed and groaned and talked of the time when there would be no roof over the children's heads. The little girl became silent too, and contented herself by sitting near Peter and holding his hand.

Life was not quite dark to Loo as long as she had Peter; still, even though he had returned, not a scrap of real sunshine seemed to have got into the house.

Towards the end of the week Mrs Rankin went out a good deal. She left immediately after breakfast, and often did not come home until late at night; but Loo knew that she was not charing, for she brought back no pleasant half-crown in her pocket, nor any delightful appetising basket of broken-meat and vegetables. She would return in the evening dead tired, and with her boots very muddy and her petticoats all draggled and wet; but although in the old days she was extremely particular never to allow any one to walk across her well-cleaned floors with muddy boots, now she did not care a bit.

'It don't matter,' she used to say; 'there's no use in cleaning up and putting in order. There, Loo! let the place be, I tell you; I'm not going to waste any more soap and water over it.'

On the evening before the week was up, Mrs Rankin came back from one of her long rambles looking quite fierce and excited.

'Here,' she said, taking two red herrings out of a bit of paper and putting them on the table, 'we may as well have a bit of a relish for our supper, as it is for the last time. You're fond of red herring, ain't you, Pete, my boy?'

'Oh yes, mother,' answered little Peter; 'more particular if it ain't too salt.'

'There, there, child! Loo shall soak the herrings

afore she frys 'em, and that'll get out some of the salt.—Look alive now, Loo, and get the supper ready.—Pete, my lamb, you come here and sit on mother's knee.'

Little Pete rose in his feeble way, and tottered across the floor to his mother. He was very weak since he had come out of hospital, and was also strangely silent, sitting and brooding to himself, and not taking much notice, even of Loo.

When his mother took him on her knee now, he laid his head on her breast and closed his eyes.

'Do you feel bad, sonny?' she asked, stooping and kissing him.

'No; I'm quite well,' he answered.

'You don't want to be back in hospital, do you?'

'No, mother; I'd a sight rather be at home with you and Loo. Only I do want'——

'What, my boy?'

'Mary Holland!'

Loo, who had been in the act of putting the herrings on the gridiron to fry, turned quickly round at these words, and glanced at her little brother out of two big, sorrowful, passionate eyes.

'I want Mary Holland,' repeated little Peter in a reflective tone. 'We was just coming to Doubting Castle, and I want to know what Giant Despair did. Mary Holland can tell me, but Loo won't let her come. I want her, for I want to hear more about Giant Despair.'

'Sakes, child!' exclaimed Mrs Rankin, 'you have queer, outlandish taste. Wicked Gates indeed, and Giant Despairs!—why, it's enough to turn your head, my poor sonny. But there, if you want to see Mary Holland, why don't you see her? She's willing enough, I'll be bound.'

Peter opened his lips eagerly, but then he closed them again; not on any consideration would he vex Loo. It was Loo who prevented Mary Holland from coming. More than once during the past dismal days he had heard Mary's voice on the stairs. Loo had spoken to her angrily, and she had not come in. Well, he would not get Loo into trouble now.

'I'll tell you what,' said Mrs Rankin; 'maybe all this power of worry is the best thing that could have happened to you, Pete; you wants rousing, that's what you do. I thought I wouldn't say a word until we had had our bit of supper; but there, where's the use of putting things off?

And, after all, it's good news—at least for you, little Peter.'

'What's up, mother?' asked Loo suddenly.

'You mind your herrings, Loo; they'll burn if you don't keep a-turning of 'em.'

With a sudden fierce determination Loo took the gridiron and put it in the grate.

'The herrings can be cooked when the news is told,' she said. 'Now then, mother, what is it? What's the news that's good for Pete and bad for the rest of us?'

'You always was that contrairy,' exclaimed Mrs Rankin.

'Do, mother, tell what it is!' said Peter in his cooing voice.

Mrs Rankin looked down at the thin little face. The big eyes gazed up at her.

'Well, well,' she said, 'it's jest this. I can't pay that ten pounds, and we'll be sold up. The furniture and the plates and dishes, even to the best tea-service, will be sold. Landlord says that they'll fetch a bit over the ten pounds, so there'll be something for me to put by for a rainy day; but we can't keep house no more.—Why, what is it, Pete? Don't you turn as white as that; you won't be bad off, my boy, whoever

is. What do you think of the sea, Peter? You always did pine desperate for the sea.'

'I'd like to know about Christian and Hopeful,' said Peter, 'and if they got out of Doubting Castle. I wish Mary Holland would come.'

'So she shall, presently,' said Mrs Rankin, in some alarm, for she thought the child did not quite know what he was saying. 'Now then, my bonny man, you pick up heart; it's good news for you, whoever else it's bad for. I have got an order, and you're to go down to Margate to-morrow, to a beautiful Home for Sick Children, where you can play on the beach and gather shells, and get some colour into them poor white cheeks.'

'Is Loo coming, mother?' asked little Peter.

'Loo? No. Why should she? Loo ain't ill.'

'I'm not ill; I'm quite well. Is Mary Holland coming?'

'Sakes, child, no!'

'Are you coming to the sea with me, mother?'

'No, my sonny, no.'

'What's to come of you and me, then, mother?' interrupted Loo, speaking in a harsh, grating sort of voice.

'You and me are going to service,' said Mrs

Rankin, looking up at her daughter and speaking in some defiance; 'that's what you and me has got to do. I have been in luck enough to get a cook's place with fair wages for myself, and young Mrs Simpkins round the corner has promised to take you on as maid-of-all-work. Now then, you're in luck to get a place, so don't let me see no sulks, and get the herrings ready for supper, and be quick about it.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

'LET'S GO ON PILGRIMAGE.'

HE herrings were cooked, and the little family drew up to the supper-table.

Peter only picked at his food—he was too weak and ill to care even for the

relish of red herring; but Loo, notwithstanding the anger which swelled in her heart, was ravenously hungry. She drank her tea and ate her bread and herring in absolute silence, and Mrs Rankin, who was also tired and hungry, did the same.

At last the meal was over and the widow got up to go out.

'I'll be back by-and-by,' she said, turning to the children. 'I am going to tell Mrs Simpkins to send for your little box at twelve o'clock to-morrow, Loo. She'll let you go to school in the morning, but all the rest of your time is hers. You've got three children to mind, as well as to watch the shop bell when Mrs Simpkins is in the back parlour. She'll give you your victuals and a shilling a week;

you're in rare luck to have got so good a home, I can tell you. As to Peter, the superintendent of the Home, Miss Joliffe, will take him down to Margate herself to-morrow. She'll call here at two o'clock for the child. You'd best put Pete early to bed, Loo, to prepare him for his journey, and you wash up them things—don't leave them messing round. Oh, my word! there's a sight of trouble breaking up a home, and I so honest and industrious, too; it's all come of your keeping company with bad, low boys, Loo Rankin. Things wouldn't have come to this dreadful pass if Joe Carter hadn't stole Mrs Reynolds's ring.'

With these last remarks Mrs Rankin went out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Peter, who had been sitting quiet and listless, pricked up his ears now. He looked at Loo, who was standing by the hearth. 'Come and sit nigh me, Louisa,' he said in his quaint way.

The words had a queer effect upon Loo. She rushed up to the little fellow, caught him roughly in her arms, sank down in her mother's arm-chair, and began to sway herself backwards and forwards, holding little Peter tightly to her breast, while long-drawn, heart-breaking sobs convulsed her small, thin frame.



'Of course,' answered Peter; 'why, it's printed—it must be true.'
P. P. P.



'Let me be for a minute, Pete,' she gasped presently. 'I'll get all right very, very soon; let me be, jest for a minute.'

If little Peter had learnt anything in his short life, it was patience. He remained perfectly passive in Loo's arms, and when her tears became less violent he raised one of his thin, hot hands to stroke her face.

'I'm better now,' said Loo, checking her sobs with an effort. 'Look here, Peter, answer me quick. Is that true what you says about the Wicket-Gate?'

'Of course,' answered Peter; 'why, it's printed—it must be true.'

'And there is one?'

'Yes, of course.'

'And a Mr Interpreter,' continued Loo, 'and a Palace Beautiful, and a Doubting Castle?'

'Yes,' said Peter, 'yes; and a Valley of the Shadow of Death,' he added, 'and a—a Celestial City. That's what comes at the end, Loo—a Celestial City. It's gospel true; and it's the most beautiful thing in all the world.'

'It sounds pretty,' said Loo, 'but I wonder I never heard tell of it—at school, nor in church, nor nowhere.'

'It's true for all that,' said Peter; 'it's printed.

I wish we had the book; I'm always thinking of it—always. If we had the book you'd believe it, Loo. I wish Mary Holland had brought the book back with her.'

'Oh, never mind her,' answered Loo; 'let's leave her out.'

'But I don't want to,' replied little Peter; 'I love her.'

'But you don't love her as well—as me, now, do you, Pete?'

'No, no; there ain't no one like you, Louisa.'

'Well, what I'm thinking is this,' replied Loo after a pause; 'I'm desperate, and desperate people'll do anything. Peter, listen to me. Do you want to go away from me and from mother to that place with a beach?'

'The seaside,' said Peter. 'I've never seen the sea. No, I don't want to go away from you and mother, unless it is a-going on pilgrimage; I wouldn't mind that so much.'

Loo rose suddenly and clapped her hands.

'Well, if that ain't the very thing,' she said. 'Let's go on pilgrimage.'

'How can we, Loo?'

'You listen to me, Peter. I ain't going to Mrs Simpkins's. She may send for my little box, but

she won't get me. I ain't going to nurse her three stupid children, nor to answer her shop bell, not for no shilling a week. If there's a Wicket-Gate, let's find it, Peter, and let's go on pilgrimage, and let's find the Celestial City.'

Peter's eyes began to shine.

'Let's do it!' he said; 'let's do it, and let's take Mary Holland and Paul Pry.'

'Mary Holland can follow us presently. We'll write her a letter when we get to the Celestial City, and we'll tell her how to come. That'll be far better for Mary than hunting here, there, and everywhere for the Wicket-Gate; but we'll take Paul Pry if you like, and Joe Carter. I'll go and find Joe early—early in the morning, and I'll tell him all about going on pilgrimage, and we'll start right off, the three on us, and the rabbit.'

'What'll mother say?' objected Peter.

'We won't say a word to mother until we get right into the City; then we'll write to her. She'll be more pleased than anything to think that we're safe and sound in a nice sort of place like that.'

'There ain't any place like it,' said Peter. 'There's nothing to fret anybody there; there's no cold, and there's no hunger, and no pain in your head, nor

nothing; and you never comes back once you get there; you're all right for ever and ever.'

'It sounds mighty like what they say in church about heaven,' said Loo.

'No, it's the Celestial City,' replied Peter; 'and you get there through the Wicket-Gate, and through Mr Interpreter's house, and the Palace Beautiful, and—oh! let's go, Loo; let's start at once. I just pine for it.'

'We'll go first thing to-morrow morning,' said Loo. 'We'll not say a word to mother; we'll slip out of bed as soft as mice, and we'll look for Joe, and set out on pilgrimage right away.'

Loo felt very solemn as she spoke, but she also felt queerly, strangely happy.

CHAPTER XIX.

'ARE YOU AFRAID OF LIONS?'



O Loo's surprise, Mrs Rankin never came home at all that night. The fact was this: when she went to the neighbour's house who had promised to take care

of one or two of her most precious pieces of furniture for her, she found the poor woman in terrible distress—one of her children was badly scalded; the district nurse was otherwise employed, and Mrs Rankin, who was quite as good-natured as the rest of her class, immediately offered to sit up all night to help the mother with the suffering child. She was due in the middle of the day at her new situation, and had one or two things of importance to do in the morning. When she rushed home, therefore, between ten and eleven o'clock, and found neither Loo nor Peter within, their absence did not at all frighten her, as it would a mother in a higher rank of life. Loo's little box was put out all corded and ready to be moved, and there Peter.

was a tiny bundle on the bed which contained a few of Peter's clothes.

Mrs Rankin waited at home for the children as long as she could; then she went downstairs and spoke to a neighbour.

'I can't stay,' she said. 'When Loo brings Peter home, tell her that the superintendent of the Cottage Home at Margate will call about two o'clock, and that she's to be sure to wrap Peter well up and give him a kiss for me; and tell her not to be later than three o'clock herself going round to Mrs Simpkins's. I'll leave the key of the house with you, neighbour, as Loo has been so stupid as to go out this morning of all mornings. Now I must be off, or I'll lose my situation.'

'Good-bye, neighbour; I'll be sure to see to all that you've told me,' answered the other poor woman.

So Mrs Rankin started off to her situation without feeling the least anxiety about the two children, and this was one reason why Loo and Peter were really able to succeed in going on pilgrimage.

They had a couple of clear days for their start before any one even missed them. Mrs Rankin was busy in her new situation; when Loo did not appear, Mrs Simpkins quickly supplied herself with another girl; and the superintendent of the Home for Sick Children at Margate, after waiting a short time for Peter, drove away without him, reporting the fact in the ordinary course of business to headquarters.

It was early, very early on that same morning that Loo stole out of bed. So excited was she over her daring plan that she had spent an almost sleepless night. The fact of her mother not having returned was a great relief and help to her. She rose with the earliest dawn, put some clothes which she scarcely valued into the little wooden box, corded it up tight, and left it in the front kitchen. A few of Peter's clothes were also tied in a bundle and laid by the side of the little box.

Having done this, Loo began with anxiety to make her real preparations. Her vague idea was that when she and Peter, and Joe, who must certainly come with them, once reached the Wicket-Gate, they would be provided, perhaps by Mr Interpreter—at any rate, by some one—with necessary food and clothing and shelter for the rest of their journey; but as they had not the least idea where the Wicket-Gate was, Loo thought it well to make some provision for the time they must spend in looking for it. Joe would certainly not be able to help

them, for there never was a more ignorant boy as regarded things printed in a book; and all Peter could do would be to say, 'It's true, because it's printed;' and, wise as that remark was, it would scarcely help them to find the right road. They might be days looking for the Wicket-Gate, and during that time they must eat, and they must sleep in some sort of shelter.

Loo therefore turned her practical little brain to the all-important subject of money. Amongst her treasures was a brilliant half-crown, which had once been given to her by a lady who had taken a fancy to her queer little earnest face on a certain Christmas Eve a couple of years ago. Loo had been standing by a crossing, and the gaslight fell on her dark face, and the lady had seen her and wished her a merry Christmas, and popped half-a-crown into her hand. The lady was dressed in warm sealskin and furs, and her fluffy golden hair had been reflected brightly in the rays of the gas-lamp, and her blue eyes had looked kindly into Loo's dark ones, and her teeth had gleamed like pearls when she smiled. Her face had made a deep impression on the child, and she had treasured the half-crown and never told a soul about it. Sometimes, on dull Sunday afternoons, when her mother was out and

she was all alone, she used to take her treasure from its hiding-place and polish it up brightly with a piece of wash-leather, and then she would kiss it, and dream of the lady with the golden hair and blue eyes. Loo meant never to spend that money; it was a beautiful and sacred treasure in her eyes.

Now, however, circumstances had arisen which made it necessary for her to part with it. She slipped it, therefore, into a little old purse, which she hid in the bosom of her dress, and selecting carefully all her best and most valuable clothes, and also Peter's best and warmest little garments, she tied them in a shawl, and then waking Peter, told him that it was time to be off.

'Where to?' he asked, starting from his sleep, and looking round him in bewilderment.

'We're going on pilgrimage, Pete; I have tied up the bundle,' said Loo. 'Get up now, and eat your nice hot breakfast. See, I have made some beautiful strong coffee, and there's enough left in the canister to give mother her breakfast when she comes in.'

'Isn't mother in now?' asked Peter. 'I'd like to kiss her afore I goes.'

'No, she ain't in—and a good thing, too. If you kissed her you'd wake her; and if she woke, she'd

ask what you was up for, and she'd soon find out the truth, and 'tisn't on pilgrimage you'd be going, but away to that stupid seaside. Come now, get up. Mother never came home at all last night.'

Little Peter sat up on the edge of his bed. Loo proceeded to dress him, putting on all the warm clothes she could find. At this hour of the morning it was decidedly chilly, and the little fellow shivered as Loo helped him on with his shoes and socks.

'I'm glad we're going,' he said, looking up with a brave smile; 'and pilgrims always do shiver a bit, don't they, Loo?'

'I don't know,' answered Loo; 'I know nothing about them—nothing at all. It's you as knows about the pilgrims, Pete.'

'Yes, yes,' said Peter. 'I'm very glad we're going, although it is a bit chilly getting up so early in the morning. Pilgrims have a bad time first, and then they has a good time. Loo, are you afraid of lions?'

'Lions!' exclaimed Loo. 'We ain't going to meet wild beasts, are we?'

'Yes; but they'll be chained. Now let's drink our coffee and be off.'

CHAPTER XX.

STARTING ON PILGRIMAGE.

T was between five and six in the morning when the children set out on pilgrimage. It was really very cold outside, and Peter's teeth chattered, and his hands and lips

turned blue. He was not going to grumble, however, for he had quite a warm, jolly feeling at his heart. At last, at last, he was—what he had so long desired to be—a Christian soldier and a pilgrim. There had been a slight frost during the night, and when he pounded the hard road with his little feet, he felt sure that he was a very manly person indeed.

'It's nice to bear a bit of hardship,' he said, looking up at Loo. 'All pilgrims do, you know, Loo, and it makes it more real-like.'

'Come on, now, and stop talking,' said Loo; 'we must be in good time at Covent Garden Market if we're to find Joe, and without Joe I'm not going to stir a step—not a step.'

'And Paul Pry is to come too, the darling,' said

Peter. 'Oh yes, let's hurry up; I like walking when I'm out so early in the morning. Don't you, Loo?'

But Loo was too anxious and full of thought to answer her little brother. She knew that they must be very careful, very prudent indeed, if they were to keep themselves alive before they reached the Wicket-Gate. Their little party would consist of four, and although one of the four was only a bunny, still that bunny must be fed, and, what was perhaps more troublesome, must be carried. Now, Loo knew quite enough about the world to be sure that half-a-crown would not go very far in supporting three children and a rabbit; and as she and her little brother hurried to the market, she was wondering which of their clothes she could sufficiently spare to turn to money at the pawn-shop. Joe was very unlikely to be able to help them with money, although they would not dare to go on pilgrimage without his protection.

They arrived at Covent Garden soon after six o'clock, and, to Loo's unbounded delight, she soon caught sight of Joe's shaggy head of red hair and of his thin white face as he leant moodily against one of the pillars in the market, looking around him for a chance of employment.

Loo quite started when her eyes rested upon her old playfellow. She had never seen Joe look so dreadfully disreputable, so out of elbow, so fierce, so starved, so despairing before. Her heart went out to him with a great ache of love, but at the same time she was almost repulsed by him; she wondered if Peter would be afraid of Joe. If this were the case, how could she possibly manage? Go on pilgrimage without Joe she would not!

But just then, just when Loo's heart was full of the most anxious oppression, Joe caught sight of her. A smile broke out all over his face; with two or three bounds he was by her side, Peter was lifted from the ground into his arms, and his big hand was clasping both of Loo's in a fierce, hungry grip.

'Oh, ain't this luck!' he exclaimed. 'I never was nearer starved in all my life. I have had a time—more like a rat in a hole than anything else. Oh, ain't it prime to see you, Loo, and little Pete too! Well, them police couldn't catch hold on me. I have been in a case; and I—well, never mind—I have slept anywhere, and eaten when I could, and that not often. But it's all right now, ain't it? I suppose you have come with news for me, Loo Rankin? I suppose them police ain't going to hunt me no more?'

'I haven't come with no news of the police,' said Loo. 'They may be hunting you, or they may not, Joe—I know nothing about them; but look here, don't you fret no more, Joe, for they won't be a-hunting of you long. You'll soon be as safe as safe can be.'

'You're coming on pilgrimage with us,' said Peter; 'and where's Paul Pry?—for he's coming too.'

'Paul Pry's safe enough. But there, what are you talking of, little chap? Going on pilgrimage—what on earth's that? You must have had a bad dream, and you do look peaky.'

'It isn't a dream,' interrupted Loo; 'it's as real as real can be.'

'It's in a printed book,' exclaimed Peter.

'Yes, it's printed,' said Loo; 'and we're going to do it, and we want you to come along with us.'

'Oh, my eyes,' exclaimed Joe, 'wouldn't I like that, just!'

'Yes, we want you to come,' said Loo. 'Let's set down where no one can find us, and let's talk it over.'

'I'm awful peckish, though,' exclaimed Joe. 'I ain't had nothing to eat since this time yesterday, and then it was coffee without milk or sugar, and

a bit of broken bread. I never was so down on my luck, never; and the hunger do keep gnawing. I have pulled my belt as tight as anything, but it won't stop it. Couldn't you wait until I have earned something to buy a breakfast with, Loo?'

'No, we won't wait for that,' exclaimed Loo. 'Oh, you poor, dear old Joe! you shan't stay another moment to be fed. Here's a beautiful half-crown of mine; it's all the money we've got to go on pilgrimage with, but you must have some of it for breakfast. Here, take it, and buy some coffee, and a big hunch of bread and butter, and bring me back the change.'

Joe stared so wildly at the half-crown that Loo thought his eyes would start out of his head; then, without a single word, he made a clutch at it, and rushed to the coffee-stall, leaving Loo and Peter standing by themselves in the market-place. For a moment Loo wondered if he would bring back the change, but only for a moment. She quickly felt assured that, whatever Joe's faults might be, he would be true to her.

'Let's sit here and smell the flowers, Peter,' she said to her little brother; and the two children seated themselves on an empty box.

A good-natured-looking market-gardener, who was

attracted by Peter's sweet white face, offered him a bunch of chrysanthemums. The little fellow took it in one of his thin hands, with a radiant, delighted smile.

'He looks a bit seedy, poor little chap,' said the man, glancing from Peter to Loo, and then back again from Loo to Peter.

'Please, sir,' said Peter suddenly, 'can you tell me whereabouts I can find the Wicket-Gate?'

The big farmer burst out laughing.

'Hark to the little un,' he exclaimed. 'Why, now, young master, there's a wicket-gate leading to a path across one of my fields; but you'd better look spry before you ventures there, for I keep my bull in that field just now.'

'Is a bull a wild beast?' asked Peter.

'Well, yes, after a sort. I wouldn't advise you to have no dealings with my Nimrod; he don't have the best of tempers, and he don't like small boys.'

Peter, however, had turned a bright, excited face towards Loo.

'Now, Loo,' he cried, 'you see it's true, as true as the Bible—there is a Wicket-Gate, and it don't matter a bit about the wild beast, for he's just like the lions, and he's sure to be chained.'

The farmer had not heard Peter's remark, but he did turn round again when Loo addressed him.

'Please, sir,' said Loo, 'would you mind telling us the name of the place where you lives?'

The farmer stared.

'My place ain't no manner of use to you, little girl,' he said; 'it's a matter of nine or ten mile from here, and it's called Norton Melbury.'

CHAPTER XXI.

THE 'A B C.'

OE came back at this moment with the change. 'Here's a shilling and a sixpence and two threepenny-bits and four pennies,' he said, dropping the money de-

liberately into Loo's small hand. 'I've had a right good filling meal—a hunch of bread and a mug of coffee—and I feel a wonderful sight better. Now, what's all this talk, and what do you mean to do?'

'To go on pilgrimage,' said Loo in an emphatic voice. 'Mother has had to break up our home and go out to service, and she wanted me to go to service too, and poor little Pete to be sent away to a house near the sea; but I'm not going to no service, and Pete's not going to no house by the sea. We're going on pilgrimage, and you're coming with us.'

- 'And Paul Pry too?' said Peter.
- 'Yes; Paul Pry too.'
- 'I can't make out what you're driving at,' said Joe.

'Well, I'll tell you when we're fairly on the road; but now, will you come or not?'

'Yes, I'll come; it can't be worse than the life I'm leading.'

'You won't see Covent Garden no more.'

'That don't matter.'

'We're going to the Celestial City,' said Peter in his clear voice, 'and once we get inside them gates, they don't let us out for ever and ever.'

'That sounds like prison,' said Joe, a cloud coming up on his forehead.

'No, it ain't, Joe,' said Loo; 'it's beautiful. We'll explain it presently. You're coming along with us, so that's all right; but now what we have got to do first of all is to find some money.'

'Oh, my word!' said Joe, 'haven't you got a lot of money in your hand?'

'No, that ain't half enough. We may be days finding the Wicket-Gate; although that reminds me there's one at a place called Norton Melbury.'

'Never heard tell on Norton Melbury,' said Joe.

'Oh, well, we'll find it somehow! There's a farmer there what gave Peter a flower, and he told us about it; he lives there. But, Joe, we must get some more money.'

'Right you are,' said Joe, rubbing his red head.

'I'm your slave and no mistake. I wonder, now, if I could steal a few handkerchiefs this morning. I've a good mind to try.'

'No, no, Joe; you mustn't,' said Loo, laying a firm, wiry little hand on his ragged sleeve. 'Pete and me wouldn't go along of you if you were a thief like that. No, I'll tell you what we'll do. I have brought all the little bits of clothes I could spare in this bundle, and what I thought was, that we could pawn them.'

Joe's eyes gleamed.

'Show us what you've got, Loo,' he said.

The children had seated themselves behind a great pile of bits of sticks, straw, and half-withered vegetables. Loo removed her little bundle from where she had slung it over her back, and carefully and cautiously opened it.

It certainly did not contain much of value: a worn little sailor-suit, which had grown quite too small for Peter; an old linsey frock of Loo's; a couple of pairs of boots; and a flimsy hat with a faded artificial rose stuck in it.

'That's all,' said Loo. 'Will it fetch anything?'
Joe examined the poor little supply of worn-out
clothes with a knowing air.

'We'll get something for them,' he said; 'maybe

a shilling, maybe one and six. I know a pawnshop round the corner. Shall I take the little bundle, and bring you back the money, Loo?'

'Yes, Joe,' answered Loo; 'and be as quick as ever you can, for it's time we were starting to Norton Melbury.'

Joe slung the bundle over his shoulder, and in the space of a twinkling disappeared with it round the corner.

Peter looked up anxiously at Loo.

'What are your lips moving for, Louisa?' he asked. 'Is it praying you are?'

'No; I'm counting how much money we'll have if Joe brings us back one and sixpence for the bits of clothes. Two and fourpence I have now—add a shilling—that makes three and four—and sixpence, three and ten. It's fine to be a scholar, ain't it, Pete?'

'Yes,' replied Peter. 'I wonder where the farmer is. I'd like to know how we're to get to Norton Melbury.'

'We'll go and find him,' answered Loo. Taking Peter's hand, she led him round to the part of the market where the good-natured farmer had kept his stall. Alas! the stall was empty and the farmer had disappeared.

Peter.

A cloud crept over Loo's face. What was to be done? Norton Melbury conveyed no idea whatever to her mind; she had never heard of the place before. It was a good way from London, the farmer had said; but it could not be very far, or he would not be able to bring his goods up to market. A wicket-gate was at Norton Melbury; doubtless it was the Wicket-Gate. She stood and pondered. Joe returned breathless and touched her arm.

'I've got one and sevenpence halfpenny. Ain't it fine?' he exclaimed.

'Yes,' said Loo.

'Now, shall we be off? Them police may be looking for me here, and then I couldn't go along with you.'

'Yes, Loo, do come; don't stand staring like that,' exclaimed Peter.

'I have it,' exclaimed Loo; 'I have it! It's an awful lot to spend, but we must do it, and maybe it's the cheapest thing in the end.'

'What in the world do you mean, Loo?'

'We must buy an A B C,' said Loo.

'I know all the alphabet,' said Peter.

'And so do I,' said Joe. 'I have no learning, I ain't a scholar, but I can do my A B C D E F G.

Don't you waste your money on that sort of thing, Loo Rankin.'

'I must,' answered Loo. 'It'll cost sixpence, and it's a sight of money; but the A B C I mean ain't no alphabet—it's a book what tells the names of places and how folks is to get there. Teacher had one at school, and she showed it to me once.'

CHAPTER XXII.

MRS MURRAY'S LITTLE SHOP.

T took the children some time to find the right sort of shop within which to purchase an A B C Railway Guide. It was still very early in the morning, and the

booksellers' shops were not open; but by-and-by, in a side street, Loo saw a woman taking down her shop shutters. Several gaily bound books were to be seen within the shop, as well as brightly printed cards. Altogether, this little shop appeared to be just the sort where an A B C Guide might be found. By this time Joe had fetched Paul Pry from the secret nook, behind a barrel in Covent Garden, where he had hidden him. Peter's little white face glowed with delight as he petted the rabbit, which seemed to have grown a good deal since the last time he had seen it.

Loo desired Joe and Peter to stand by a corner which led into another street while she went to interview the woman who kept the little shop.

The woman was now busy placing the boards, which contained all sorts of advertisements of different magazines and papers, outside her shop. She was looking at them with a pleased gaze when Loo came up and touched her arm.

'Please,' said Loo, 'here's sixpence, and we're in a great hurry, and can I have an A B C?'

'A railway guide?' exclaimed the woman, gazing at the queer little figure in great astonishment. 'Whatever does a poor mite like you want with a railway guide? This ain't the Country Holiday Fund time; the children are all back, bless you!'

'I know,' answered Loo. 'We're not country holidayers; we're pilgrims, and we're going to Norton Melbury. We don't know the way, and have you got an A B C? Here's sixpence if you have, and please give it to me and let me be off!'

'Come right into the shop, little girl,' said the woman. 'Norton Melbury you want, do you? My word! you bring up the country to me when you speak of it. Norton Melbury! Why, 'twas there I was born; if that's all you want an A B C for, you keep your money, child, and I'll tell you how to get to it.'

'Oh, ma'am! you are kind,' answered Loo. 'Peter, and Joe, and Paul Pry, and me, we're just ever

so thankful to you, ma'am; and please tell me is the Wicket-Gate really there?'

'The wicket-gate!' exclaimed Mrs Murray, for that was the name of the good-natured little shopwoman. 'My word! I should think there are a sight of them all over the place.—Is that you, Bob? Lay them papers down, and go out and fetch me in two penn'orth of milk. There's two-pence; now look sharp; I'm wanting breakfast.'

Bob, a lad of about thirteen, neatly dressed and with a bright face, picked up the twopence and dashed out of the shop.

'Now, little girl,' said the woman, bending towards Loo, and giving her a bright, kind smile, 'I'll tell you fast enough how to get to Norton Melbury. You go down to the river-side and take the steamboat that goes to Kew. Now, will you remember? You prick up your ears and listen sharp. Some of the boats don't go as far as Kew, but some do. You must wait for the Kew boat; then you go on board, and when you come to Kew, out you get, and you walk for the matter of a mile, or a mile and a half, right away from Kew and away from Richmond, along the Norton Road, until you come to some cross-roads with a signpost on them, and one of them will point you

to Norton Melbury. It's about three miles to walk after you leave the boat, but if you look spry, and are lucky enough to get a boat for Kew early in the day, you'll get to Norton Melbury before noon.'

'Thank you, ma'am, ever so much,' said Loo.
'I'm awful obliged, and so's Peter, and Joe, and Paul Pry.'

'Well, you are a queer little trot. I wonder, now, what you want at Norton Melbury when you get there?'

'The Wicket-Gate,' said Loo. 'You're sure and certain that it's there?'

'Heaps of them all over the place! Dear me, I never heard tell of no one that wanted to go a long way just to find a wicket-gate before. But look here, little girl, if you and your party want a respectable lodging for the night, you can't do better than put up with my people.'

'No, we won't want no lodging,' answered Loo. 'Once we find the Gate we won't want nothing else!'

'Well, well! you know your own business best; but if you do happen to want a bed for the night, there's the Murrays in Honeysuckle Cottage, and you couldn't do better. Bless me, the child's gone!'

Mrs Murray started as she said the last words.

'What a queer little creature, with all her nonsense about the Wicket-Gate!' she said aloud. 'It can't never be the Pilgrim's Progress that she's got in the back of her head. What a fool I was not to think of it at the time! I wonder if she's out of sight?'

Mrs Murray rushed to the door of her shop.

Bob was coming back, holding a can of milk carefully in both hands.

'Bob,' called out his mother, 'you didn't see that queer-looking little girl as was talking to me when you come in just now? You didn't see her as you came along? She said she was with a party called Joe, and another party called Peter, and some one with the outlandish name of Paul Prv.'

'Yes, mother, I saw her,' answered Bob; 'I saw her just now along with a big boy with red hair, and a little chap with a face as white as wax. The big chap had a rabbit clutched under his arm!'

'I wish you'd call them back, Bob,' said his mother.

Bob thrust the can of milk into his mother's hands, and ran quickly round the corner where

Loo and her party had disappeared. He returned in a few minutes, hot and breathless.

'I can't see nothing of them,' he said.

'Well, well,' answered his mother, 'I'm sorry—main sorry—as I was so stupid; but come along in now, Bob, and have breakfast.'

'What ailed the little girl, mother?' asked Bob as he was eating up his hot porridge and milk.

Mrs Murray gave him a troubled glance out of her dark eyes. 'Why, my lad,' she said, 'I'm awful feared as that poor little un ain't quite right in the head.'

'Why, mother, what did she do?'

'She wanted to go to Norton Melbury, the place where I were born, of all spots in the world, a-looking for a wicket-gate!'

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE ROAD.

OO was in high spirits when she met Peter, Joe, and Paul Pry. 'It is all as right as anything,' she said. 'The woman in that shop was real kind, and she told

me exactly how we were to go to Norton Melbury. There's no doubt that Norton Melbury's the right place to begin pilgrimage from. There's a Wicket-Gate there, and no mistake.'

'But how are we to get to Norton Melbury?' asked Joe. 'You did not buy that A B C D E F G sort of thing, did you, Loo?'

'No. Ain't we in luck? Why, the woman in that there shop was born at Norton Melbury; she knows all about the place, and she told me exactly how we were to go. Fancy, Joe—fancy, Peter—we needn't go by no horrid train, but we can just take the steamer from Westminster Bridge, and we'll have a real jolly time on board until we get to Kew. It's cheap on them steamers, and

I'm told it's real beautiful. You just sit still and you feel as if you were floating away and away.'

'To the Celestial City,' said Peter, with that queer sort of unearthly look in his eyes that always gave Loo a grip at her heart.

'Oh, it's beautiful!' she said. 'Let's go along at once. Let's get to Westminster Bridge and take the next steamer. Don't let's waste any more words talking; let's get to Kew as fast as we can. When we're there, we've only to walk three miles; and what are three miles, when you see the Wicket-Gate at the other end? Why, we'll begin pilgrimage to-night. Oh! ain't it prime?'

Loo's excitement was shared by Peter, but Joe looked a little doubtful. It is true that his heart was beating with delight at the thought of doing anything in Loo's company, but what queer nonsense she did talk about pilgrimage and a wicket-gate! He hoped she was right. He hoped that what was written in a printed book was, as Peter expressed it, true—so true that no one could possibly doubt it. Still, being fourteen years of age, and a practical London street-boy, he had his doubts, and they worried him and kept him from feeling as rapturous as Loo and Peter were. As to Paul Pry, that large fat rabbit took all the

world calmly. He was hungry—he generally was hungry—and as there were no green things to nibble, he tried to get a little nourishment out of Joe's ragged sleeve.

'Oh, shut up, bunny!' cried the lad. He gave Paul a cuff on the head, which the gentle bunny did not think of resisting. After a time, finding that there was nothing to do, and no opportunity for him to sit up and wash his face, he went to sleep in Joe's strong arms.

The children had reached Westminster Bridge by this time, and by-and-by a river steamer came ploughing her way, making froth and commotion, through the water. As luck would have it, she happened to be a Kew boat, and the children, in high spirits, went on board. They sat side by side, and enjoyed themselves for the next hour vastly. As they went rapidly up the river, there was much to see and ponder over and admire. Of course they knew nothing of the history of the many places they passed; nevertheless the places themselves were pretty, the air was balmy, and the sky was blue.

There was a faint breeze which made no one cold, and the sunshine fell right across Peter, and warmed him as he sat next to Loo.

'Ain't this a sight better than the seaside?' she whispered to him, pressing him up to her side as she spoke.

'Oh, ain't it!' he answered. 'Loo, I never was so happy in all my life before. Fancy me going on pilgrimage at last, and you going too, Loo, and Joe and Paul Pry! Oh, it's beautiful! I'm a Christian soldier,' continued Peter, 'and I'm a pilgrim. Oh, it's all too fine for anything!'

He laughed, and kicked his feet, and drew himself up and tried to put on a martial, soldierlike air.

Joe scarcely spoke at all. The sole expression which he seemed capable of was contained in the few words, 'Ain't it prime?' and he said this whenever Loo nudged him by the arm.

At last they reached Kew, where they had, of course, to leave the pleasant steamer; but their pleasures were by no means at an end when they did so. With very little difficulty Loo found the road which led to the small village of Norton Melbury. It was a real country lane, and as the ground was dry underfoot and the sun shone overhead, the children enjoyed themselves even more than they had done on board the boat. Now was the time for Paul Pry to prick up his ears. Green

things surrounded him; the place looked very like that bunny-home of his in another part of the country; perhaps some familiar bunny would peep at him from the holes in the hedges. If he saw one he made up his mind for a violent struggle for freedom.

As to Peter, there were flowers to gather, and autumn leaves to gloat over. Whatever pleased Peter pleased Loo. Even Joe, although he was too uneducated to care much for nature, could not help feeling his spirits slightly raised when he witnessed the happiness of the other two children. It took them quite an hour to walk through the pretty lane. When they got to the end of it they saw a signpost, one finger of which pointed to Norton Melbury. Loo had good sight, and, gazing ahead of her, she saw the pretty little village nestling snugly down in the valley below.

'That's where the Wicket-Gate is,' she said, catching Peter by the hand, and pointing down in the direction of Norton Melbury. 'We'll have begun our pilgrimage to-night, Peter, boy.'

'Yes,' said Peter. He stood perfectly still as he spoke. He was tired with his walk, and before Loo spoke his little face had been looking very

white. Now a great flood of colour swept over it, and his big eyes sparkled.

'Yes,' he said again, 'we'll get through the Wicket-Gate to-night. Oh, it's prime, it's prime!'

'But what about the bull in the farmer's field?' said Loo.

'Didn't I say as it would be chained?' said Peter. 'The lions were chained, and so will the bull be. Oh, there ain't nothing to fear. Come right on, Loo.—Joe, come right on, won't you?—We'll have begun pilgrimage to-night, and maybe we'll reach the Palace Beautiful.'

'Oh, my word! I hope so,' said Loo.

'If it's a palace we're going to,' remarked Joe, 'I don't suppose they'll let me in, in these rags; my clothes ain't up to that sort of place, I can tell you. Well, well! if I get some broken bits, I can sleep most anywhere; so come along, and let's be quick about it. It's the queerest sort of a fairy tale I ever listened to, but I suppose'——

'What do you suppose?' said Peter, who had now quite taken the lead of the little party. 'It's written in a printed book: ain't that enough for anybody?'

^{&#}x27;I suppose so,' replied Joe.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CHILDREN IN THE VILLAGE.

HE children had to go downhill to the pretty village of Norton Melbury. It was the sort of little old-fashioned place which no one would suppose could be

found so close to the great whirl of London. The people who lived there were all country-folk; they knew nothing of London pleasures, and nothing also of London sorrows; they lived in a small world, and were all in all to each other, every neighbour knowing every other neighbour, and all the children being playmates one with the other.

The village consisted of one long, straggling street. There were houses on either side of the street, but the houses did not join, and were in many cases not even close together, so that glimpses of the rich and lovely country which lay at each side of the village could be seen as one walked along.

The sound of a swift-flowing river reached the children's ears as they pursued their way. The

houses were all shapes and sizes; some large, some small, some with thatched roofs, some with slate, some covered with ivy, and some looking wonderfully beautiful with Virginia-creeper, which was now a great mass of scarlet and yellow. On the window-sills were to be seen pots full of geraniums and other gay flowers, and in many cases there were bright little gardens as well.

The London children had never before seen so pretty a sight as that village, and Joe and Loo were very much inclined to linger and look around them; but Peter's whole soul was now filled with a sort of martial ardour. He felt exactly like Christian in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and as if he were fleeing from the City of Destruction. The pretty things of the gay little village had therefore no power to attract him.

'Let's come straight on,' he whispered to Loo; 'let's get in sight of the Wicket-Gate. There's no manner of use lingering here.'

'Oh, but ain't it pretty?' said Loo.

'Never mind whether it's pretty or not,' said Peter; 'let's find the farmer who has the Wicket-Gate. We shall know that Wicket-Gate because there's a bull in the field. Oh! do let's come on.'

Hitherto in their progress the little party had Reter.

met with no interruption, and had scarcely been noticed by any one. It was still early-not quite twelve o'clock—when they walked down the street of Norton Melbury, and at this hour the children were in school, the men were away at their different occupations, and the women were busy in their houses, preparing dinner and attending to other domestic matters; but just at this moment, just as Peter was putting in his obstinate little words, and turning his face full upon Loo, and insisting on having his own way, they found themselves in front of a long, low, whitewashed building, out of which suddenly poured a stream of thirty or forty children, both boys and girls, of all ages from seven to fourteen, who whooped, and laughed, and shouted, and tumbled on top of one another, and, in short, completely filled the rustic street and surrounded the little foreigners from London town.

'I say!'—'Lawk a-mercy!'—'Well, I never!' cried the country children. They bore with Peter well enough, but they looked at Loo with a certain amount of disdain. Joe was very like the sort of boy who might have straggled away from his companions on a hop-picking expedition; but Paul Pry!—Paul Pry, a country rabbit—a commonplace,

stupid country rabbit—what in the world was he doing with these queer children, who were certainly strangers to Norton Melbury?

'I say,' exclaimed a big boy, going straight up to Joe, 'you must have caught that rabbit in Farmer Benson's field. You'll be took and locked up if you steal rabbits, I can tell you.'

'No, we didn't catch it in no farmer's field,' said Peter angrily. 'It's my rabbit; I bought him for sixpence in the country. You let us alone.'

Peter didn't know himself, he felt so brave and fearless. He pushed the boy aside, who felt inclined to take Paul Pry violently out of Joe's arms and give him his liberty in a field near by.

'You are a queer little un,' said the boy, gazing down at Peter. 'Why, what a wishy-washy little chap you are, to be sure!'

'Do let him alone, Tom,' said a girl, who had noticed how white Peter's face was, notwithstanding his brave talk. 'These children are strangers, and mother says we ought to be good to strangers, and you remember what teacher said about it on Sunday.'

'Oh, come, Susan, we don't want your preaching,' said her brother Tom. 'Well, let's get home to dinner; I'm mighty hungry if you are not.'

Tom was one of the big boys, and his example was quickly followed by the others, until at last the group of children seemed to melt away as quickly as they had come, with the exception of the kindhearted girl whom her brother had called Susan.

'The little un seems tired,' she said, looking at Loo as she spoke. 'Are you going far?'

'Yes, miss, a good bit of a way,' answered Loo, who regarded Susan Hastings, in her neat print frock and pretty, tidy hat, as quite a lady; 'we're just starting on pilgrimage, miss.'

'On what?' asked Susan.

'We're going to the Celestial City,' said Peter, 'and we don't want none of you to be hindering of us. Perhaps you can tell us the way to the Wicket-Gate, though; it's close handy, ain't it?'

'I never heard such talk,' said Susan. She was puzzled for a moment. It so happened that she did not know the wonderful story of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, but something seemed to tell her that the children were on a wrong track.

'There are heaps of wicket-gates,' she said; 'we have them in most of our fields. There's one close by; it leads quite up to The Grange.'

'Who lives at The Grange, please, miss?' said Loo. 'Is it the market-gardener?'

'No, nothing of the sort. The people who live at The Grange are quite grand. If you want to go to the market-gardener's place, you'll have half a mile farther to walk. Farmer Weston lives at the other end of the village, beyond the Goose Green and the Round Pond, where you'll see a lot of ducks swimming about. You pass the pond, and then you'll get to a meadow with a hedge all round it, and a wicket-gate leading into it; but I don't expect it is open now, on account of the bull.'

'The bull! the bull!' said Peter, beginning to jump up and down; 'then we've found the Gate at last. Thank you very much, girl.—Come on, Loo! come on!'

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WICKET-GATE.

ETER was so much excited that he did not even wait for Loo to say good-bye to Susan Hastings, but ran on in front, and Loo and Joe were obliged to follow him.

'You needn't have been so rude, Peter,' said Loo; 'that girl seemed a good-natured sort, and we might have asked her a heap more questions if you hadn't run on in such a fidget.'

'But I don't want to ask her questions,' said Peter. 'We're close to the Wicket-Gate, and we'll soon be pilgrims. What does it matter about a girl like that? Maybe we'll get to Mr Interpreter's house to-night—that is, if we're quick, and don't lose any time talking to strange girls.'

Peter's manner had so completely altered that Loo scarcely recognised him as the timid child who had sat so quiet and silent in the little room in London.

'We must humour him, Joe,' she said, turning to the elder boy. 'Of course we must,' replied Joe. 'Only, I say, I'm mighty peckish; I hope there's food to be had for folks when they goes on pilgrimage. I want my dinner; that's what I want.'

'Mr Interpreter will give us some dinner,' said. Peter. 'Oh, do come on, both of you!'

He still continued to take the lead, and Joe and Loo silently followed him. They found themselves walking along a road which was shaded on one side by tall pine-trees, and on the other was bordered by an open common, on which flowers of all sorts were still blooming, as if no winter were likely to kill them, and on which also several bunnies, very like Paul Pry in appearance, were disporting themselves. The sight of his old friends and cronies excited Paul Pry a good deal, and he made tremendous efforts to jump out of Joe's arms; but Joe was a match for him, and, though he voted him under his breath 'a tiresome, worriting sort of beast,' he would not for the world give him his liberty without Peter's permission. At last they reached a part of the common which was hedged in by a strong wire fence. This led away at a little distance to green fields, and just in front of them the children saw an unmistakable wicket-gate.

'Here we are! Here we are at last!' shouted Peter. He ran first, opened the wicket-gate, and passed through.

'Oh, Pete, do take care of the bull!' exclaimed Loo.

'I tell you it's chained, Louisa,' cried the little boy. 'The lions was chained, and so is the bull. Here we are, all three of us—pilgrims at last. Oh, do—do come on!'

Loo could not help being excited by Peter's enthusiasm. She quickly opened the wicket-gate, and found herself standing on a narrow path, which went winding like a soft-looking yellow ribbon in the midst of the green grass which surrounded it. Having passed the wicket-gate, she was, of course, a pilgrim. It was nice to have succeeded, and she looked round at Joe to express her pleasure.

'Well, we hadn't much trouble, had we, Joe?' she said. 'It's nice to be pilgrims, ain't it?'

'I thought we'd have food and all that sort of thing when we was pilgrims,' said Joe. 'I don't see nothing to eat in this find, except for Paul Pry. It seems a mighty fine thing for Paul to be a pilgrim, but I don't see that it does us much good.'

'Oh, we've only just begun,' said Peter. 'Do you see, here's the narrow path, just as it's writ in the book what Mary Holland read to me. We've to follow the narrow path, and after a bit we'll get to the Slough of Despond. We'll sink there; but never mind, it'll be all right.'

'Oh, my word!' exclaimed Loo. 'I've never heard of the Slough of Despond before. What's that, Peter?'

'A bog, most likely,' said Peter.

'A bog and a bull,' cried Joe, 'and nothing whatever to eat! I can't say I think much of pilgrimage.'

'But there's a Celestial City at the end,' said Peter. 'It's worth a fight or two to get there; and long before we get to it there's Mr Interpreter and the Palace Beautiful. Oh, I'm not afraid, whoever else is. Do come on!—do come on!'

The children now began to walk quickly along the narrow path, which led up and up over the green fields. As there was no sign of either a bull or a bog, Loo's courage began to revive, and she seriously hoped that some of the things in Peter's printed book might not be going to happen to them. Joe looked eagerly out for any sort of house where there might be a chance of having a meal, and

Paul kept bumping and bounding and struggling to get back to home and liberty once again. The children had reached the brow of the hill, when Loo, looking suddenly to her left, uttered a piercing cry, and took Peter's hand in hers.

'He's on us! There he is!' she shrieked. 'Oh, Pete! fly! fly!'

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RED-FACED MAN.

OO'S startling words caused the other two children to turn round eagerly. The sight which met their eyes was quite enough to terrify even the bravest. A large bull,

which had been quietly grazing in a distant part of the field, was suddenly attacked by a meddlesome little terrier, which came barking and snapping at his heels. For a time the bull paid no attention to the worries of his tormentor; but when the dog, growing more venturesome, proceeded to snap at his legs, he turned fiercely round, uttered a deep bellow, lowered his head, and came charging after the dog in the exact direction where Loo, Pete, and Joe were standing. The children had not a moment to fly to shelter. Long before they could reach the hedge with which the field was surrounded the bull would be on them. There was a breathless moment of agony, when even Peter began to lose his courage. Then Joe made a hasty suggestion. 'Let's lie flat

down on the ground,' he said; 'that bull's after the dog, and he won't touch us if he don't see us.'

Joe's clever thought was immediately acted upon, and the bull, fiercely pursuing the terrier, rushed past the children without noticing them.

They did not dare to get up for some time; but when they did, their terrible enemy was grazing quietly at the other end of the field. The terrier was nowhere to be seen, and Joe prophesied that the troublesome little animal had met the death which he deserved.

'Let's creep softly to the hedge on this side,' said Joe, 'and get out of the field as fast as ever we can. I wouldn't let that bull see us for all the pilgrimages that were ever heard on. Let's get out of the field, Loo, along by the hedge; maybe he won't take any notice of us.'

Even Peter's courage was a good deal shaken by the terrible fright he had had, and he was now willing to allow Joe to take the lead. 'We ought to keep on the path, though,' he murmured. 'They keep on the path in the printed book, and we ought to do it.'

'Printed book or not,' exclaimed Joe, 'we won't keep on this path. Now, come along, Pete, and no more folly.'

'Yes, Pete, we must get out of this field, whatever happens,' said Loo.

She took her little brother's hand; they soon reached the hedge, by the side of which they walked, casting many terrified glances in the direction of the bull. After some little time they reached the end of the field, where a turnstile was placed for their convenience. Here again they saw the yellow, winding path, and Peter ran to it with a cry of joy.

'I don't believe in your book,' said Loo. 'You said as the bull would be chained, and he wasn't chained, and we were very nearly killed by him!'

'And there's nothing at all to eat,' said Joe. 'Seems to me it's a poor trade going on pilgrimage. I thought when we got past the Wicket-Gate that we were to have food, and houses to live in, and all that sort of thing. You mind as you told me, Loo, as we would? You said you wanted money to buy food till we got to the Wicket-Gate, and afterwards we needn't trouble our heads, because there was food and houses all the rest of the way.'

'Well, I thought so,' said Loo; 'but it don't seem like it. Maybe all printed books are not true.'

'This one is,' said Peter, stamping his foot.

'Mary Holland read it to me, and I know it's true.'

'Oh, Mary Holland—I don't think much of her,' said Loo. 'And now, whether the book is true or not, I'm starving, and so is Joe; and so are you, Peter, for the matter of that.'

'No, I'm not,' said Peter in a stout voice. 'I'm a Christian pilgrim and a soldier, and I never was more happy in my life.'

'Hullo! who's talking about being a Christian pilgrim and a soldier?' said a gruff voice in their ears.

The children turned hastily and saw a red-faced man standing close to them.

'Please, sir,' said Peter, running up to him, 'are you Mr Interpreter? I do so hope you are. I want to see him so badly.'

'Eh, what's that you're saying, little chap?' exclaimed the red-faced man.

'Are you Mr Interpreter, sir?'

The man burst into a loud laugh. 'Bless your heart,' he exclaimed, 'I don't know as I can interpret much, except the price of wheat, and the best sort of swedes to put into the ground, and what sort of seed potatoes won't get blight by-and-by. But, I say, you don't mean to tell me as you three

young uns have just been through the field where that great savage bull is grazing? Why, didn't you see the boards with "Beware of the bull" up all over the place?'

Peter still made himself the spokesman. 'It didn't matter whether boards were there or not,' he said. 'Pilgrims must go through that field, for the Wicket-Gate's at t'other side; only you ought to have a stronger chain on your bull, Mr Interpreter.'

The red man gazed attentively at Peter when he spoke thus; then he looked at Loo and Joe, and touched his forehead significantly. He evidently thought that little Peter was not quite right in his head. 'I can't make out what you're driving at, young un,' he said; 'but let me tell you three children that you did a mighty dangerous thing going through that field. And now, may I ask what you are doing on my land?'

'Oh, please, sir, have you a house, and can you give us anything to eat?' said Loo. 'Oh, I never was so starved in my life! If you can give us something to eat, we'll be ever so grateful; and I can pay for it, please, sir.'

'You come along of me,' said the red man, with a smile. 'The wife never likes to encourage tramps;

but you do look peckish, and this little un would be all the better for a good hot meal. I never saw such white cheeks in my life. Come, young un, would you like to ride pick-a-back up to my house?'

'Thank you, Mr Interpreter,' said Peter. 'I'm awful obliged, and I hope you'll let me see the Man with the Muck-rake, and all the other things, when we get there.'

'Well, come along and have a feed first,' said the red-faced man.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MR INTERPRETER'S HOUSE.

ETER enjoyed his ride very much, and the other two children followed contentedly.

The man walked with great strides, and presently took them through a five-barred gate, and along a rough sort of field which led into a big farmyard. Here there was much to interest and astonish town children—turkeys gobble-gobbling, geese cackling, ducks quacking, and a conceited hen announcing to all the world in the highest tones that she had just laid a nice fresh brown egg. there was Mr Chanticleer walking about in fine style with all his wives following him. Some little tiny yellow chickens were taking refuge under their mother's wing, and as the farmer entered the yard, accompanied by the three strange children, a roughhaired terrier ran to meet him. He quite yelped with delight when he saw his master; but Joe and Loo were so little to his taste that he could not forbear some snarling growls, and he had

Peter.

difficulty in keeping his teeth from attacking poor Joe's ragged trousers.

'You lie down, Dempster,' said the man.—'Now come on, children; he won't touch you.—I say, Bessy woman, are you indoors? Hullo! look out there. Here I am, and three hungry young uns along with me. I say, Bessy, is dinner ready?'

At these words, which were shouted with a roar that almost resembled that of a wild bull itself, a woman with her dress neatly tucked up over a scarlet petticoat, and her hands wet, as if she had just been dipping them in water, ran into the porch.

'Now, what's up, James?' she said. 'Mercy me, who have you brought along with you?'

'Well,' said the man, putting Peter down on his feet, 'I found them just on the borders of my land, having gone through the field where Farmer Weston's Nimrod is kept. 'Twas a mercy they weren't all gored by that savage bull. I thought this little un wanted some attention, so I brought him along to you, Bessy.'

'Poor little fellow, he do look white,' said the woman. She dropped suddenly on her knees, and put her hand under Peter's chin.

'Now, sonny, what are you doing here?' she said.

'I don't know your face—seems to me you must be a stranger at Norton Melbury.'

'I'm a pilgrim,' said Peter; 'and is this Mr Interpreter's house?'

'Humour him, Bessy—humour him,' said the red-faced man. 'He's a little bit gone in the head, poor little chap, same as our Sam was when he was dying. He reminded me of Sam wonderful, and that's why I brought him to you to mother.'

'Yes, he has a look of Sam,' said the farmer's wife.

Loo had now time to notice that the woman's dress was black, and that she wore a black ribbon round her neck. The farmer's wife suddenly put her arms round Peter and lifted him into them.

'This child has a look of Sam,' she said, 'and you did right to bring him here, James. But what about the other two? They're nothing whatever but hoppickers, and we don't want hop-pickers about here; they ain't honest.'

'Please, ma'am, I am quite honest,' said Loo. 'I am Peter's sister, and this is my friend, Joe Carter. Joe is very poor, but he is'—— She was about to add 'honest' also, when the remembrance of the diamond ring came back to her, and she stopped short,

'No, I ain't honest,' said Joe suddenly; 'but I won't steal anything here. I've had a hard life, and I'm sometimes mighty peckish, and no one never told me as 'twas wrong to steal. But I won't steal nothing here. I'm a thief, right enough, but I ain't a liar—so there.'

Joe drew himself up to his full height; he shook back his mane of red hair, and gazed full at the red-faced farmer and his wife.

'Well, well! we'll take you at your word,' said the farmer. 'If you steal anything here, you go straight before the magistrate, and locked up you are; but you say you won't, and you say you ain't a liar, so I'll trust you for once.—Now come along in, all three of you.'

While the farmer was speaking his wife had been cuddling little Peter.

'There,' she said suddenly, 'if the child's feet ain't as wet as anything. Come in to the fire, my beauty.—James, you take them two round to the wash-house, and get them to wash their faces and hands before they spoil my clean kitchen.'

Mrs Murray turned abruptly as she spoke, and the next moment Peter found himself in the largest, brightest, hottest kitchen he had ever seen. All the pewter in this kitchen shone like silver, and the floor was as white as deal boards could be made. The large stove shone like a looking-glass; but what pleased poor hungry Peter more than anything else was a delicious smell which came to his nostrils. He was quite hungry enough to appreciate that smell, and as soon as ever he got into the kitchen he began to sniff.

'I'm glad you feed pilgrims, Mrs Interpreter,' he said, and then he put up his soft hand and stroked Mrs Murray's cheek.

'Well, to be sure, honey, but you have coaxing ways just like little Sam,' she said; then she pulled out a small chair that had belonged to Sam, and invited Peter to seat himself.

He had scarcely done so before the other two children, accompanied by the farmer, entered the kitchen; and now for the first time all eyes were fixed on Paul Pry. Paul had been so long away from all his brothers and sisters in the bunny-world that he had become, so to speak, accustomed to the civilised life led by men and women. Joe was not thinking of him specially at this moment, and, making a frantic jump, he suddenly freed himself, and bounding straight up to Peter, sat contentedly on his hind-legs, and began, according to his invariable fashion, to wash his face.

'Whoever has brought that nasty large rabbit into the house?' exclaimed Mrs Murray.

'It's Paul Pry,' said Peter. 'He is going on pilgrimage too; ain't you, Paul Pry?'

The rabbit cocked one of his ears, and gave Peter a furtive glance. The farmer burst out laughing. 'Well, I never see such a cute bunny before,' he said. 'To be sure, you are a rum little party, all four of you. The poor innocent what's not got his wits, and the rabbit, and the girl what's as thin as a herring, and the boy what's a thief and owns to it, and says he ain't a liar! I never see such a funny party in all my life. But there, there! you are starving, I don't doubt, and so am I. Hurry up with the dinner, Bessy, my woman; and I'd advise you, little chap,' said Farmer Murray, turning and looking at Peter, 'to hold that bunny of yours in your arms, for if Dempster happens to come in, he'll make short work of him.'

'We'd best put the creature into Sam's little hutch,' cried the farmer's wife. 'I have some cabbage-stalks, which I'll give him by-and-by. Here, let me take him, child, for if the dog saw him he'd spring at him and you too; there ain't a rabbit that Dempster would keep alive, if he had his way.'

Peter, who was cuddling Paul Pry, gave him up

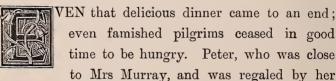
with a little sigh, and Mrs Murray carried him off to a place of safety.

The other two children were also given seats by the fire, and they all three watched with great interest the preparations for dinner. A coarse white cloth was laid upon a deal table; then some black-handled knives and forks were placed for several people; then some large, but very clean, pewter spoons; then some plates; then a huge loaf of bread and a great piece of cheese graced the board; and, finally, out of the oven was taken the most enormous and deliciously-smelling pie that Peter and Loo and Joe had ever seen.

When the dinner was served, the farmer's wife put chairs for her guests, taking care that Peter's chair was placed close to her own. Then two or three farm-servants and the farm-maid came in and took their places at the bottom of the board, and the meal began. The farmer said grace before they began to eat. As he did so, he shut his eyes and folded his hands, and Peter felt more certain than ever that he must be Mr Interpreter.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SAM'S CHAIR.



with the choicest tit-bits out of the pie, began therefore to look round him, and to consider the position of affairs. A great deal had happened since the morning, and he was feeling very happy. The wish of his heart was at last attained—he had fairly started on pilgrimage. He had passed through the Wicket-Gate, and was now enjoying the kindness which pilgrims ought to expect at the house of Mr Interpreter. There was nothing said in the printed book about Mrs Interpreter, but Peter considered her a vast improvement on the original story. When her heart warmed to him, his warmed to her, and he slipped his small hand now into hers under the tablecloth. It seemed to poor Mrs Murray then that she was holding Sam's hand once again: the hand of the child

who was lying in the village churchyard, and whose little spirit was far away from the troubles of earth, seemed once more to be within her motherly grip. Peter had the same eyes as Sam, and the same pale but enthusiastic face. When Sam was dying he said a great many very strange and unearthly things. When Peter began to speak in what the farmer considered a truly outlandish manner, Mrs Murray felt her heart drawn to him more and more.

As he held her hand now, he looked eagerly down the long board. One of the farm labourers, a very old man, with a long beard, shaggy eyebrows, and a shock of white hair falling over his forehead, especially engrossed Peter's attention.

'Mrs Interpreter,' he said, gazing full into the face of the good farmer's wife, 'is that person over there the Man with the Muck-rake?'

'Oh, sakes!' exclaimed the farmer; 'what a thing to say of poor old Samson!'

'But is he?' asked Peter. 'You do keep him here, you know, Mr Interpreter. I don't suppose he brings in his rake at meal-times; but he's very like the man Mary Holland told me about.'

'I don't think nothing of Mary Holland,' muttered Loo in an aggrieved voice. 'But is that the Man with the Muck-rake?' pursued Peter eagerly.

'It's best to humour the poor lamb, James,' said Mrs Murray. Then she bent down over Peter. 'Yes, yes, love,' she said.

'And are you Mrs Interpreter?'

'To be sure I am, dearie.'

'I'm so glad I know you,' said Peter. 'I'm so glad Mr Interpreter married you, for he wasn't married when Mary Holland read about him.'

'Mary Holland don't know nothing at all,' grumbled Loo again.

'Perhaps, Mrs Interpreter,' said Peter, 'you'll tell me how far it is from here to the Palace Beautiful.'

'My word!' exclaimed Mrs Murray, jumping to her feet, 'did any one ever hear the like in all their born days? I tell you what it is, James, this child ought to be in bed and the doctor sent for. It's an inflammation of the brain he's in for, or my name ain't Bessy Murray.'

Mrs Murray spoke in a high, strained voice, but Peter, who was half in a dream with happiness, hardly heard her. When she stood up he followed her and pulled her gown.

'Can we get to the Palace Beautiful to-night?' he asked.



'But is that the Man with the Muck-rake?' pursued Peter eagerly.
P. P. P.



'No, no, my little love; you'll stay with Mammy Murray to-night—that's where you'll stay.'

Here Mrs Murray stooped, lifted the child into her arms, and kissed him eagerly.

'Bless him!' she cried. 'If he ain't for all the world almost as good as Sam himself.'

Peter remembered that in the *Pilgrim's Progress* the pilgrims spent a night with Mr Interpreter. He was therefore quite willing to sleep in his present snug quarters.

'Thank you, Mrs Interpreter,' he said. 'We'll be very much obliged if we may stay here, and perhaps we can see the Man with the Muck-rake and the wonderful Looking-glass, and the other things, when Mr Interpreter has time to show them to us; but we must be off early, very early in the morning, for we have to get to the Palace Beautiful in good time to-morrow. How far off is it, Mr Interpreter?'

'Humour him, James,' said Mrs Murray.

A sparkle of fun came into the farmer's eye.

'It's a matter of four miles from here,' he said, 'as the crow flies. You go up a hill, and you pass through white gates, and that's the way to the Palace Beautiful.'

'Thank you very much,' said Peter. 'Now may Paul Pry have his dinner?' Mrs Murray seated Peter once more in Sam's chair by the fire, and he found himself so comfortable and so soothed in the little chair that he presently fell fast asleep.

Meanwhile the farmer beckoned Loo and Joe out into the yard.

'Now what's to be done?' he said, scratching his red head in some perplexity. 'The wife has taken to the young un, and the young un is ill. He reminds her of our Sammy, and our Sammy's gone aloft, bless him! and she'll do nothing but croon over that child all night long. But poor little Peter is one thing, and you two are another, my boy and girl. She haven't took to you, and, for my part, I don't see where you're to be lodged for the night.'

'We can't leave Peter,' said Loo in a determined voice, for her good dinner had given her great courage. 'If Peter stays, we stay; if Peter goes, we must go too.'

'Well, now, that seems fair enough,' said the farmer, 'but the thing is that the missis won't keep you, for she can't abear tramps, and it's mighty cruel on the little chap, and he so ill, to turn him out on a cold evening like this is going to be. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if we had a touch of frost by the feel in the air. It would almost cost

the death of a poor child like Peter to turn him out of doors on a night like this.'

'Couldn't Joe have a bed in the barn?' asked Loo. 'And as to me, if I may sit in the kitchen, that's all I want. It's real kind of you to do anything for us, sir, and it will be the making of little Peter to sleep in this house to-night. He has been very ill indeed, little Peter has. He was knocked down by a big dray, and his head hurt.'

'Ay, I thought it was the head that had gone wrong,' said the farmer. 'Poor little chap, I doubt if he'll ever come right again. Well, I'm the last to be hard on poor children; so you wait there, you two, and I'll go and have a talk with the wife.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS INTERPRETER.

UT Mrs Murray, although the kindest of women, had limits to her hospitality. Peter, with the look of Sam about him. was one thing, but Loo and Joe represented to her mind quite a different order of human beings. She thought of them as tramps, and she had a horror of tramps. Loo alone might have found grace with her, for Loo was by no means a shabbylooking or ragged child; but Joe-Joe was unbearable. Joe, with his ragged trousers, his boots well out at the heels and toes, his fiery red head, his freckled face, his great hands, which all the scrubbing in the world could not make clean-Joe, who, even under the best of circumstances, could never have looked anything but a very ugly, uncouth boy-Mrs Murray thought of him with horror.

'No, no, James,' she said to her husband; 'I'll keep the child, of course. I don't mind if I have to attend to him and do for him for a day or two,

poor lamb, for he reminds me in the most cunning way of my Sammy; but as to that tramp of a lad, who owns up that he ain't honest, he must get out of this, and before night, too.'

'I thought,' said the farmer in his gentlest tone, for his rough voice could become quite subdued when he talked to his wife Bessy—'I thought maybe we might give the lad a shake-down in the barn; there's nothing on earth he can steal there, unless it's a bit of old rope, and I'd turn the key on him before I went to bed.'

'And what's to come of the girl, I'd like to know?' said Mrs Murray.

'She says if you let her sit by the fire here, it's all she'll ask. Remember, she's the child's sister.'

'It's wonderful what a difference there is in families,' said Mrs Murray. 'Now, this child, poor as he is, might be anybody. Look at his dear, little delicate features. The girl ain't a bit like him.'

'Come now, Bessy,' said the farmer, 'I think she's a tidy sort, when all's said and done.'

'I don't say she ain't. I noticed as her boots were whole and her hands not too dirty. Well, then, granted she's not an out-and-out tramp, however did they two come to have a brother like that Joe?'

'Oh, he isn't their brother; he's only a friend,'

'My word!' said Mrs Murray, with a snort, 'a queer sort of friend to pick up with! Of course, it's the girl's doing—taking up with a lad of that sort. No, James, I really don't see how I'm to have her in the house all night. I'll keep the child, and the other two had best go down to the village and see if a neighbour will give them beds for a few pence.'

The farmer was about to return to the yard with the news that he had failed in getting his wife's consent to Loo and Joe's requests, when a sleepy little voice from the depths of Sam's chair suddenly made itself heard.

'What is it you're saying about Louisa, Mrs Interpreter?' said Peter.

Mrs Murray went straight up to Peter, and put her hand on his shoulder. 'You go off to sleep again and never mind, lovey,' she said.

'But I must mind,' said Peter. 'If I'm a pilgrim, she's one too, and so's Joe, and so is Paul Pry. We're all on pilgrimage, and you've been good to us, and given us our dinner. If you can't keep us all here for the night, we'll go away straight off now to the Palace Beautiful. They'll take us in there, for Prudence, Piety, and Charity never turn anybody out when they want a bed.'

'Oh, my word, my word!' said Mrs Murray. 'If that child ain't enough to puzzle any mortal! Oh, poor lamb! it's piteous to hear him. Go out and do what you think right, James. If that tramp-boy must sleep in the barn, he must; only be sure you lock him well in, that's all. You might give him a hunch of bread and a bit of cheese to keep him company. And the girl, I suppose she had better come and sit by the fire. She isn't anything like so bad as the boy, and I may have a minute of time to give her a talking to about the company she keeps. Yes, yes, Peter, my man, Louisa shall come in here; you shall all stay here with Mammy Murray until the morning, bonny man!'

Peter sighed contentedly and closed his eyes again. He was very tired—dreadfully, dreadfully tired, and the heat and the fire brought out little pink spots on his white cheeks, and made his long black eyelashes look blacker than ever. As he slept he sighed, and his breath came quick and fast, and fever stole into the little face, for his morning's adventure had given him, in his delicate condition, a severe chill.

Loo came in presently, and sat down in the chimney-nook opposite to Peter. She was very anxious that he should wake up; she wanted to tell him about the chickens and the ducks, and all

M

Peter.

the other live creatures of the farm. She had been very much interested in them, and had quite forgotten all about going on pilgrimage. As she was quite accustomed to Peter's talk, it did not strike her as in the least queer. Mrs Murray, having washed up and put everything straight, came presently and stood near the two children.

'Now, look here, little girl,' she said suddenly, fixing her eyes on Loo. 'When did your brother begin to lose his head, poor little chap?'

'He never lost his head, ma'am, 'cept for a day or two in hospital,' answered Loo.

'Don't you tell me, child. Why, to listen to him, you'd think we'd got back into the days of the Pilgrim's Progress. The Man with the Muck-rake, and the Wicket-Gate, and me and my husband being called Mr and Mrs Interpreter, and he wants to get to the Palace Beautiful, and Piety and Charity and Prudence will be kind to him, he said—why, I never heard any Christian child talk such gibberish in all my life. Of course, his brain is wandering, poor pretty little darling!'

'No, indeed, ma'am, it ain't,' said Loo. 'It's quite true what he says; we're all going on pilgrimage.'

CHAPTER XXX.

'ALL A LIE.'

RS MURRAY stared very hard at Loo when she made this strange remark.

'You can't all of you be a set of innocents,' she said. 'No, no—it's humbugging me you're trying to do; and let me tell you, girl, that ain't right nor honest.'

'But it's perfectly true,' answered Loo; 'we really are going on pilgrimage. My mother has had a deal of trouble, and she will be obliged to sell the furniture and give up the home; and she wanted to send me as maid to a woman what kept a shop near us, and I didn't want to go; and Pete was to go to a Convalescent Home at Margate, a place by the sea, and he didn't want to go; and Paul Pry—mother wouldn't let Paul Pry live in our house, and Pete's heart was set on him 'cause he bought him when he was in the country as a Holiday-Funder; and Joe was taking care of Paul Pry, and Pete was always mad to be a Christian

soldier and a pilgrim, and last night we made up our minds as we'd start right away, for Pete said it must be true as it was in a printed book; and we said we'd take Joe with us 'cause he's a big boy, and 'cause I'm fond of him, and 'cause he hadn't no food in London; and we went to Covent Garden this morning, and a farmer told us that there was a Wicket-Gate at Norton Melbury, and so we come to Norton Melbury—for a woman who kept a shop, and whose name was Murray, same as your name is, said as she was born here, and told us how to get here; and then we met your husband, and he was good to us, and here we are. Yes, it's quite true; we are all on pilgrimage.'

Mrs Murray was so much astonished at Loo's words that she sat down in a heap on the nearest chair she could find.

'Well,' she said, placing her short, fat hands on her knees, 'I never heard talk like this in all my born days before. And you mean to tell me to my face, little girl, that you think there's a *real* Wicket-Gate, and a *real* Narrow Way, and a *real* Pilgrimage?'

'I hope there is, ma'am,' said Loo, looking full into the face of the farmer's wife.

'Oh, you poor ignorant child, where were you reared?'

'I don't know as I am so ignorant,' said Loo.
'I'm in third standard at Board school, and teacher says I'm real spry at my lessons. I don't see why going on pilgrimage shouldn't be true, for Pete says it's printed, and printed things mostly are true—ain't they, ma'am?'

'Oh, you poor girl!' replied Mrs Murray. 'It's quite t'other way. Most printed things are lies.'

'Lor!' answered Loo, dropping her mouth.

'And you're on a wrong tack altogether,' said Mrs Murray, 'and you must give it up. You have no call to be wandering about in the country with no home and no money. As to that lad Joe, I'll have nothing to do with him; he ain't fit company for the likes of you, and he must get back to his own haunts and stay there, or the police will be looking sharp after him. You seem to be a respectable sort of girl, and you should obey your mother, and go back to that nice little place in the shop and do your duty there.'

'But I don't want to,' said Loo. 'I hate being a maid in a shop with a shilling a week, and I hate minding kids.'

'It seems to me you've a lot of bad feelings in

you, London girl, said Mrs Murray in a tone of strong reproof. 'Well, I have no time to stand talking to you any longer; I must go out and see that the cows are properly milked.'

'Oh, ma'am! I never saw cows milked; mightn't I come too?'

'No; you stay and mind your little brother. Sit as still as a mouse, for he wants all the sleep he can get, poor little lamb! Now then, I'm off. There's no such thing as pilgrimage, girl, and you'd best face that fact at once. It's only a story-book story, and there isn't a word of truth in it.'

Mrs Murray left the kitchen with much energy as she spoke, and Loo and Peter were left alone. Peter was fast asleep, with the fever-spots growing brighter on his cheeks, and his breath coming a little faster out of his faintly parted lips.

These signs of illness, however, were quite lost upon Loo, who had not much experience in such matters. Mrs Murray's information troubled her a good bit. She had plenty of common-sense, and she quickly made up her mind that the farmer's wife must be speaking the truth, and that the wonderful story which had got into Peter's little brain was really only a story, and had no founda-

tion whatever. If this were the case—and Mrs Murray certainly ought to know—the sooner Peter was wakened out of his dream of folly the better. Loo, acting on the impulse of the moment, as she generally did, bent forward and touched her little brother's arm. He was sound asleep, but her touch wakened him. He opened his eyes, brilliant with fever, and looked at her. He had been dreaming about the Palace Beautiful, and when he glanced at his sister his lips parted in a happy smile.

'Whatever is it, Louisa?' he asked. 'Is it time for us to start? I'm quite ready if it is.'

'No, no, Pete; you stay quiet,' answered Loo. 'Oh, Peter, there ain't any pilgrimage! The book's a lie—Mrs Murray says so.'

'What's a lie?' asked Peter. 'What book's a lie?' He started forward in his little chair, and an eager look filled his eyes.

'The printed book what you said was true, Pete boy. It ain't true, not a word of it. There ain't no Wicket-Gate, and no Mr Interpreter, nor nothing.'

'You do talk folly, Louisa,' replied Peter in a lofty tone of mingled faith and disdain. 'Why, this is Mr Interpreter's house! I'm surprised at you.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

'WE MUST KEEP IT UP.'

HEN Peter said these words he rose from Sammy's little chair and stood and faced Loo.

'Don't you talk like that any more to me, Loo,' he said, 'for I ain't going to believe you. London is the City of Destruction, and I've left London for ever, and I'm going to the Celestial City, and nothing nor nobody'll turn me back. I hope you'll come too, Loo, and I hope Joe'll come; but whether you come or not I must go, for my heart's there,' said Peter. 'I'm lonely; I'm desperit lonely, and my heart's in the Celestial City.'

Peter didn't cry as he said these words, but his eyes grew brighter until they shone like two stars, and Loo saw that he was really ill, and thought the only thing she could do was to soothe him.

'Well, Pete darling, I won't say any more to-night, anyway,' she answered. 'Mrs Murray is real kind.'
'Mrs Interpreter, you mean,' corrected Peter.

'Well, if you like to call her so I don't mind; anyhow, she's real kind, and so's the farmer.'

'But I wish she'd let me see the Man with the Muck-rake,' said Peter. 'Of course I saw him at dinner, but I want to see him at work, gathering up the straws, and the Shining One standing behind with the crown in his hand. I know which I'd choose if I was the man—don't you, Louisa?'

'I don't know the story,' said Loo. 'You know I never read the *Pilgrim's Progress*.'

'Oh, the Shining One offers the silly man a celestial crown, but he is such a fool that he thinks of nothing but the bits of straw. I looked at him eating his dinner, and I wondered, and I thought maybe if I saw him at work, I could coax him to give up the straw and take the crown. I wish Mr Interpreter would come in, for I want to see him, and I want to look through the wonderful Looking-glass.'

'Well, he'll come in presently,' said Loo.

Peter's words and his look really alarmed her now. She wondered what would become of them all if Peter became dangerously ill. They could not expect Mr and Mrs Murray to do anything more for them after the one night, and as, of course, there was really no pilgrimage to go on, the only

thing for them to do was to return to London the next day. This might be possible if Peter were really well and in good spirits, but Loo sorely doubted if Pete would be fit to do anything the next day; and then he had got this idea of going on pilgrimage so firmly in his head that it would take a great deal to undeceive him. He had set his faith on it, and little Peter's faith was strong. The printed book was as true as the Gospel to him. There was a real City of Destruction, a real Wicket-Gate, a real Interpreter's house, a real Palace Beautiful, and a real Celestial City at the end of the journey. If any one could so speak to Peter as to open his eyes, and tell him that all the lovely story was nothing better than a fairy tale, he might, Loo greatly feared, turn his face to the wall and die.

Peter was Loo's one treasure; whatever happened, he must not die.

'We must keep it up,' she said to herself. 'We mustn't on no account go to London to-morrow; we must pretend that we're pilgrims still, and then Pete will be happy. Maybe some one in the country'd give me a little place, and I could persuade Pete that we was resting on our pilgrimage, and he might stay at some lodging that could be

had cheap, and I might look after him a bit. Oh dear! I don't know how to manage; but leastways, anyhow, for the present, Peter must be humoured.'

Peter had fallen asleep again, and Loo, anxious and restless, went softly out of the kitchen and stood for a little time in the porch.

She saw Joe standing near one of the big haystacks. She motioned to him to come to her.

'I'm going to be locked up in a minute in the barn,' said Joe. 'The farmer don't believe as I won't steal, and I ain't a bit surprised. I'll sleep fine in the barn, I can tell you; I won't have had such a bed for weeks, and I'm to have bread and cheese for supper. I say, Loo, going on pilgrimage is prime, that it is!'

'Oh, but, Joe, it's all lies!' answered Loo. 'Mrs Murray knows the book that Pete got the story from, and she says it ain't true, not a word of it.'

'Then what in the world did we come for?' answered Joe angrily.

'Oh, hush, hush! I believed it when we came. But the worst of all is, Joe, we must go on pretending to believe it still, for if we don't little Pete'll die. He mustn't die whatever happens, so we've got to humour him. I thought I'd tell you, Joe, for it's best for you and me, being quite

old compared to Pete, to know the truth; but we must humour Pete, whatever happens.'

'Then that means,' said Joe, 'that we're to go on pilgrimaging to-morrow as if it was true?'

'Yes, that's what it means.'

'But how are we to be fed? If there's no Narrow Way, and all that sort of nonsense, who's to feed us? We won't meet a man like this here farmer again in a hurry.'

'Well, Joe, you can go back to London to-morrow if you like,' said Loo. 'Perhaps it'd be the best thing for you to do; but I must go on pilgrimage on account of little Pete. I'll trust to getting odd jobs by the way, and earning a few pence now and then. I'm real handy in a house. Mother trained me prime, I can tell you. But perhaps, Joe, you'd better go back to London.'

'Not I,' answered Joe; 'if you can do odd jobs, so can I. And do you think I'll desert you, Loo? No, no; I know I'm bad, but that ain't Joe Carter. We have started fair, and we'll stick to it and keep together, whatever happens, little matey.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE PATCHWORK QUILT.

Peter awoke with the dawn. He was less feverish than he had been on the previous evening; his cheeks had lost their high colour; he was once more the little, puny, delicate child who had aroused kind-hearted Mrs Murray's warm sympathies. She had put him into Sammy's bed to sleep.

There was a lattice window to Sammy's bedroom, and when Pete opened his dark-gray eyes he could see the prettiest peep of fleecy clouds, and even trees and green fields, through the tiny panes of glass. The country view aroused his interest, and he sat up in bed and looked around him with immense satisfaction.

'I'm so glad that I am really and truly a proper pilgrim at last,' murmured little Peter. 'I 'spect I'll get as far as the Palace Beautiful by night. I wonder if Prudence, Piety, and Charity will

come out to meet me? I like Mrs Interpreter very much, of course; but I mustn't stay here, for the other pilgrims didn't. Oh yes, I'm real, real glad that I am a pilgrim and soldier! I hope it won't be long before I get to the Celestial City.'

At this point in his meditations, Peter's eyes were attracted to the very showy and quaint patchwork quilt which covered Sammy's bed. Since Sammy's death Mrs Murray had treasured this patchwork quilt with great care. Her little boy had been very fond of it, and had often stood by her side when she was making it, and had given her heaps of advice about it, for Sammy had quite a taste for the harmonious arrangement of colour, and for the prettiest shapes which patchwork patterns could be made to assume.

'Be sure you put in plenty of the little rosebud-sprig, mother,' he would say. 'I like the little rosebud-sprig 'cause it was in your gown, mother, and it will help to remind me of you when I lie in bed and look at it.'

Mrs Murray had remembered Sammy's request, and had put plenty of the rosebud-sprig pattern into the quilt, and Sammy had lain under that quilt when he was dead.

It was taken out of her own oak bureau, and,

smelling of lavender, had been put over Peter on the previous night. It would have been impossible for Mrs Murray to have given the boy greater proof of the love she felt for him than this.

Pete had never seen a patchwork quilt before, and he admired it now immensely, and amused himself examining the different colours and, in particular, in tracing out the rosebud-sprig which Sammy had liked so much.

Presently, however, it was time to get up; he dressed himself as best he could, and went down to the big, warm, spicy kitchen.

Loo was seated by the fireside; she looked very pale, and there were red rims round her eyes. Mrs Murray was busily preparing a great dish of eggs and bacon for breakfast.

'Yes,' she was saying to Loo, 'I can't speak fairer; I'm willing to adopt the poor little fellow. He has been sent to me by the blessed Lord Himself, in place of my Sammy, what's safe in the New Jerusalem. He's a delicate little man, but I make no doubt that the fresh air, and the sight of the animals on the farm, and the full and plenty he'll have to eat, will soon harden him up and make a different child of him.'

'Only, I can't give him up,' said Loo; 'he's all

I've got in all the world. I can't do without him, not nohow.'

'Then you're a selfish girl,' said Mrs Murray. 'But here comes the child, and we'll talk no more for the present.—Sit you down, my lamb, and eat up your nice egg; 'twas laid by Brownie not an hour ago, and it's full of milk and beautiful fine flavoured. Brownie was Sammy's hen, and I wouldn't give no one who wasn't his living counterpart Brownie's eggs.'

Pete sat down with great content on his face. Mrs Murray placed a little table in front of him; she put a white cloth on the table, and then laid on the cloth a pink cup and saucer. The cup had gilt letters on it; these letters formed the two words, 'For Sammy.' There was a plate, also, which matched the cup and saucer. Mrs Murray poured out a cup of fragrant coffee, piled the plate with sweet brown bread and butter, and then Brownie's egg, done to a turn, was placed before Pete.

Never even in hospital had he tasted such a delicious breakfast before; never in all his life had any one treated him so kindly nor made such a fuss over him.

He took it all quite calmly, saying to himself

that this was the correct way to treat pilgrims. He was a pilgrim on his way to the Celestial City, and, of course, Mr Interpreter's wife was bound to be kind to him.

After breakfast Loo went out into the yard to speak to Joe.

Joe had slept well in the barn, and having partaken of a good breakfast as well as a good supper the night before, felt extremely cheerful and, as he said himself, quite fit to fight the world.

'Here you are, Loo,' he said, coming up to her and grinning from ear to ear. When Joe smiled it seemed as if every bit of his whole body laughed; his eyes danced and twinkled; his head wagged; his very hands and feet seemed to express uncontrollable mirth. No one could speak of his smile as beautiful, but it certainly was cheerful enough to win him favour.

'Well, little matey,' he said, 'I've had a real fine time. I slept like a top. I haven't had such a sleep for weeks, and now I'm quite ready to do whatever you wish. How's Pete this morning, Loo, and when are we to go ahead on our pilgrimage? Oh, yes, I understand that it ain't any pilgrimage in reality; but if you wish to humour the kid, why, I'm agreeable.'

Peter.

'I don't know what to do,' said Loo. 'There's that farmer's wife, she's gone and taken a dreadful fancy to Pete; she thinks as he's like a child of her own what went and died, and she wants to keep Pete always; and when I said as he was all in all as I'd got, she frowned at me dreadful, and said I was a real selfish girl.'

'But you ain't, Loo,' said Joe. 'I never in all my life saw such an unselfish girl as you; and as for the farmer's wife keeping the kid, why, it strikes me that it's Pete himself that's to say "yes" or "no" to that. If he believes as he's going on pilgrimage, and that there's a Celestial City at the end of the journey, is it likely now, Loo, that he'd stay here at Mr Interpreter's house? Why, of course he wouldn't.'

'Oh, Joe, how clever you talk!' said poor Loo, cheering up as she listened to these words. 'Why, of course, it's for Pete to decide, and I think I know what he'll be doing. But dear, dear, dear! it is snug in that kitchen; and she gave him a beautiful breakfast—a new-laid egg, and brown bread, and coffee what would make your mouth water. She said she'd soon have Pete a strong boy. It's rough work, pilgrimaging, even if it's true, and Pete can't stand any roughness.'

'Yes, he can, if his heart's in the business,' said Joe. 'But you go back and ask him what he wishes to do, Loo. I'm agreeable to go back to London or to stay with you and humour the kid, only I want to know.'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SAMMY'S CLOTHES.

RS MURRAY had gone out to attend to some of her numerous morning duties, and Pete was alone in the kitchen when Loo came back to him. He was stand-

ing by Sammy's chair, and was gazing in a reflective sort of way into the fire. When he heard Loo's footsteps he turned eagerly.

'Well,' he said, 'where's Joe? It's a beautiful morning, Loo, and time for us to be going on.'

'Well, that's what I came to speak about,' said Loo. 'Do you want to go on, Pete? Is there any use in it? You know what I told you last night; you know what Mrs Murray says?'

'That don't matter,' said Pete; 'you don't suppose I mind what people say, when the thing's printed. It is true as true can be; there's a City of Destruction, and a Narrow Way, and a Celestial City, and I'm going there. It's time we were starting, Loo.'

'All right,' answered Loo cheerfully. In spite of herself she could not help being glad that Pete did not wish to stay with Mrs Murray. Pete seemed to think nothing at all of the comforts of the good farmer's house. His mind was set on one thing only—the pilgrimage which he had undertaken.

'Yes,' he said in his decided little voice; 'it's time we were off. I'm sorry that Mr Interpreter was so busy, and that I didn't see the Looking-glass and the other wonderful things; but never mind—we must go now.'

'Well, we must wait until Mrs Murray comes in,' said Loo. 'I never met a kinder woman than she has been, and more especially to you, Pete; and we must say "Good-bye" to her.'

Pete considered for a moment, but could not remember, when Mary Holland read the *Pilgrim's Progress* aloud to him, whether Christian bade Mr Interpreter 'Good-bye' or not; he walked to the window and looked out impatiently. He liked Mrs Interpreter; but nothing in all the world was so important as going right forward on the pilgrimage.

'I tell you what,' he said; 'there's Paul Pry in that cage, and if you, Loo, and Joe will come with us, we can start right away. Maybe we'll

meet Mr and Mrs Interpreter, and if we do we can say "Good-bye" to them; but anyhow we'd better start now while the sun's bright and there's a good long day before us.'

Pete spoke with great decision, but Loo really would not have yielded to his wishes but for something that occurred at that moment. Mrs Murray did most of her household work herself, but a girl used to come in to help with all sorts of odd jobs in the morning. This girl was now seen to enter the kitchen bearing a quantity of small clothes in her arms; she laid them in front of the fire, and began to arrange them in little heaps.

'What are those for?' said Loo, interested in spite of herself.

'They're for this little boy,' said the girl. 'Mrs Murray says as he is going to stay here in Sammy's place, and these are Sammy's clothes. which are to be aired right away for him.'

There they lay in little heaps on one or two chairs in front of the fire. Such pretty clothes: little washing sailor-suits, and little serge suits with brass sailor-buttons, and a dear little reefer coat with lots of brass buttons on it, and a cap with H.M.S. Captain in gilt letters across the

front, and piles of stockings—warm woollen stockings—and nice little shoes. Why, Pete would look like a gentleman—like a prince—in garments like these. All the same, as she glanced at them Loo's heart became filled with a great, furious hatred. What did Mrs Murray mean by supposing that she could adopt Pete and take him away from Loo? Pete was not her boy. What right had she to talk and act as if he were? Yes, the sooner they were off the better.

'Come, Pete, let's go,' she said, taking her brother by the hand.

'We can't go without Paul Pry,' said Pete.

'Oh, my word!' exclaimed the girl, who was busy opening the clothes and spreading them out before the fire; 'you're not going to let that great big rabbit loose in the garden? Missis will be wild if you do!'

'No; we'll take care of him,' said Loo. 'He is our own bunny,' she continued; 'there's no fear as he'll get loose in the garden.' She helped Paul Pry to get out of his cage, held him in a tight grip, and, followed by Pete, went out into the porch.

She was relieved to see that neither Mr Murray nor his wife was anywhere in sight. Joe was standing by one of the tall haystacks with his hands in his pockets, and a contented look which was altogether new to him on his thin face.

'Joe, here we are; come along,' said Loo. And then the three children went as quickly as possible out of the yard and down the shady lane by which the farmer had conducted them the day before to his hospitable doors.

'If we meet Mrs Interpreter, I can kiss her and say "Good-bye," said Pete.

'Yes, yes; but come on now,' said Loo. The thought of Sammy's clothes was still burning a fierce angry pain in her heart. 'Come on,' she repeated; 'if we meet her, well and good; if we don't we can't help it. She meant to be kind, but we've got to go on—haven't we, Pete?'

'Yes, yes,' said Pete; 'of course. We have got to find the Palace Beautiful as fast as we can.'

The children soon left the pretty farm and its kind inhabitants behind them. The day was a bright one, and they were all well fed and well warmed. It was impossible, therefore, for them to feel in low spirits, and although Loo and Joe both now knew the truth, they could not help greatly enjoying their morning ramble.

Loo had still nearly one and sixpence in her pocket; so they could buy food for that day at

least. Loo's idea was that they should walk on to the next village; there she intended boldly to ask for work as a maid. Joe, too, could do odd jobs for the farmers, if they would let him. Oh yes, she was quite certain that they could manage to keep soul and body together somehow until little Pete had grown tired of his craze of being a pilgrim. They must make an excuse to Pete for lingering in the next village; they must pretend to him that they were on the right road to the Palace Beautiful. Anyhow, at the worst, they must persuade him to submit to short delays in his journey to the Celestial City.

Loo whispered her thoughts to Joe as they walked side by side. She had ample opportunity for doing so, for Pete walked ahead of the other two, singing a gentle little song to himself, and thinking of the happy moment when he would ask for admittance to the Palace Beautiful.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WHITE GATES.

FTER walking for nearly two hours, the children saw some white gates right in front of them. Pete had kept up his strength wonderfully, but when he saw

the gates he turned first red and then pale, and clutched hold of Loo's hand with a firm grip.

'I'm real glad as we've reached the Palace Beautiful,' he said. 'I'm tired; I want to go to bed. We can go to bed here, and spend the night here; let's go right on.'

'Where?' asked Joe. 'You ain't never going to be so mad as to go inside those gates, Pete?'

'Why not?' said Pete. 'They lead to the Palace Beautiful. Yes, of course, I'm going inside.'

'No, they don't,' said Joe. 'Come, Pete; maybe the people inside those gates will set the dogs on us. I wouldn't go in there if I was you; I wouldn't, really.'

Peter was very tired, and not nearly as strong

as he imagined himself. He turned redder than ever, and great drops of dew began to stand out on his little forehead.

'Loo, you and me'll come,' he said, clasping his sister's hand.

'Oh, dear little Pete!' said Loo, 'there's a village close by, and we'll have something to eat there. We can come afterwards if you really wish it. I've got one and six in my pocket, and I can buy a nice meal for all four of us in the village. We'd best have something to eat before we go inside the white gates.'

'What nonsense!' said Pete, dashing away the tears which had risen to his eyes. 'If you've very little money, why should you spend it, Louisa? We'll get plenty to eat at the Palace Beautiful. Prudence, Piety, and Charity will give us heaps to eat. It is their business to help pilgrims.'

'We'd best humour him,' said Loo in a low tone to Joe; 'he may be ill if we don't.—Well, Pete,' she continued, 'if you're really set on it, I'll come up with you to the house. I'm afraid as you're wrong, and this ain't the Palace Beautiful; but we can come and try.'

- 'Why should not Joe and Paul Pry come too?'
- 'No; they'd best sit here and wait for us. You

sit there by the side of the hedge, Joe, and if Pete is right I'll come back and tell you.'

'Oh, I'm sure I'm right,' said Peter. 'Give me your hand, Loo, and let us start right away.'

The two children now approached the great white gates. There were very large ones in the middle, which they had not strength enough to open, but the little postern-gate at one side yielded to Loo's efforts, and they found themselves inside a long and very beautiful shady avenue. There was a lodge covered with honeysuckle and all kinds of beautiful creepers close to the gates, and a woman now came and stood in the porch of the lodge.

'You can't come in here, children,' she called out to the pair. 'Go back this minute. You have no business here, and Lord Staunton don't allow it. Here—are you deaf?—go back this minute, the pair of you.'

'You're a rude woman,' said Peter, 'and we don't mind you. We're going to the Palace Beautiful, and we don't mind what nobody says. We're pilgrims, and the Palace Beautiful is inside these gates. You're a *very* unkind woman, and I'll tell Prudence what you've said.'

'My word!' said the woman, in some astonish-

ment. She stared very hard at Pete, and then looked at Loo. 'That child don't seem very well, girl,' she said, 'and you'd best take him home to his mother. Where do you live, girl?'

'We used to live in London,' replied Loo, 'but we've got no home anywhere.'

'Yes, we have; we've got the Celestial City,' said Pete.

The woman gave Pete another puzzled glance; then she touched her forehead with a meaning look at Loo.

Loo didn't reply; there was a great lump in her throat. Pete's words had frightened her; she could not help seeing for herself that he was ill, and terribly weak and excited.

'I'm sorry for that poor child,' said the woman; and for you too, girl. If you wait a minute I'll bring you out a bit of cake; but, pilgrims or no pilgrims, you can't come in here. Lord Staunton hates tramps like anything, and his orders is most strict on that point. You wait where you are, and I'll get a bit of cake, and then the two of you must go out.'

The woman turned into her cottage. The moment she had done so Pete looked wildly around him. 'I won't turn back,' he said to Loo. 'I'll never get to the Celestial City at this rate. The woman is an enemy, and I must not mind her. Let's fly and hide here under the shrub, Loo.'

He dragged Loo's hand frantically as he spoke, and the two children ran into the thick shrubbery which stood to the left of the lodge. They crouched down under a large laurustinus-bush. Loo's heart was beating so loudly that she could scarcely hear the woman's voice when she came out and began to shout to them. If there had been a dog about, their hiding-place would have been quickly discovered, but, as it was, the great bush effectually concealed them. The woman concluded that the children had taken themselves off without waiting to partake of her hospitality, and soon forgot all about them as she busied herself cooking her husband's dinner.

When all was quiet Loo and Pete crept out of their hiding-place.

'See,' said Peter, 'here's a narrow path. Hullo! it must be the Narrow Path! Let's walk on as fast as possible till we get to the Palace. My word, Loo! you ain't half plucky enough for a pilgrim. You ain't like me; I'm never going to give in till I get to the Celestial City.'

'But you see, Pete,' answered Loo, 'those Murray people said it wasn't true; they said as there was no such thing as pilgrims.'

'And do you think I believe them?' answered Pete, turning round and fixing his big eyes on his sister. 'I tell you it's printed; what more can any one want?—Come on, Loo, do!'

Loo saw there was no help for it. The narrow path on which they now found themselves walking led up and up through a lot of beautiful underwood, until at last the children found themselves on a broad winding avenue. There was a long white house, with many porticoes and heaps of windows, right in front of them. The house had a tower at one end. A heap of ivy grew over the tower. There was a courtyard in front of the mansion, and a wide archway covered with ivy led right into the courtyard. A tall, slender-looking lady stood on the steps of the house; she was holding a couple of leashes in her hand, to which two foxhounds were attached.

'That is Charity, I'm sure,' said Peter. 'Oh, the darling, let's run to her!'

CHAPTER XXXV.

CHARITY.

O, Pete, you'd better not,' exclaimed Loo.
'What nonsense!' answered Peter.
'She's Charity, and she'll be delighted to see a pilgrim.'

His face blazed with excitement; his eyes sparkled; he felt the faith in which he lived firmer and stronger than ever. It sustained him even to resist Loo, whom as a rule he obeyed implicitly.

'Come on, Loo; come on,' he repeated. But when she refused to comply he wrenched his hand out of hers with sudden force and began to run down the avenue as fast as his little feet would permit. He soon passed the ivy-covered archway, and prepared to run fleetly across the courtyard. At this moment, however, doubtless through an accident, one of the foxhounds escaped his leash, and, rushing up to Peter, barked furiously, and knocked the poor little fellow down. Having done this, the dog planted his front paws on the boy's

chest, and looked round with inquiring eyes at his mistress. At a word from her he would have made short work of the poor little boy. The appearance of the children in the courtyard was so sudden and unexpected that the tall and beautiful lady was taken completely by surprise; then a piercing cry from Loo arrested her attention. She saw Pete lying flat on his back with closed eyes.

'Come off this minute, Beeswing,' she cried to the dog. The animal obeyed; she ran forward, and, dropping on one knee, bent anxiously over the child.

'Oh, he's dead, he's dead!' sobbed Loo. All the emotion which was filling her poor little heart, all her great anxiety about Peter, rose now to the surface. She knelt by the lady's side, and, seeing that the boy was unconscious through his fall and sudden fright, she flung herself over him with bitter, loud cries.

'Come, little girl, whoever you are,' said the lady, 'you are doing the child harm by acting like this. Get up and let me see to him. I hope he is not seriously hurt. Oh, I'm sure he has just fainted from fright. I have some smelling-salts in my pocket. Here, I will put the bottle to his nostrils; perhaps that will arouse him. Poor

little fellow, how did he get here? The people at the lodge are not allowed to let strangers come about the place. How did you get in, little girl; and do you know anything of this boy?'

'He is Pete,' said Loo—'Pete the Pilgrim. He's got pilgrimage on his brain, lady, and he came here; he would come here because he thought it was the right road to the Palace Beautiful. Oh, please, please don't be angry with him, kind lady!'

'No, of course I won't. So this is Pete the Pilgrim. What a very strange name! What a tiny, fragile, *pretty* boy it is! And you, little girl, are you a pilgrim also?'

'No, no; I was, but I found it ain't true. I'm nothing; only Loo Rankin. Peter's my brother, and I love him better than anybody else in all the world. We all started going on pilgrimage—me and Pete, and Joe and Paul Pry; but we stayed at a farm last night, and the farmer's wife said there was no pilgrimage—only Pete, he didn't believe her.'

'Hush! don't speak for a moment; see, he is opening his eyes.'

Pete stirred faintly at this instant; the smellingsalts were beginning to revive him. The long black lashes quivered on his white cheeks, the lids



'Are you Charity, and is this the Palace Beautiful?' he inquired. Page 227.



were slowly lifted, and the lovely gray eyes, looking dark, almost black, at this moment, were raised full to the lady's face.

'Are you Charity, and is this the Palace Beautiful?' he inquired.

The lady was dressed in white—white serge. She were a sailor-hat on her head, with a white ribbon round it. She was very tall, and her hair was of a bright shade of gold; it looked burnished in the rays of the sun. Her eyes were blue, and she had a wonderfully tender and lovely mouth.

'You look like an angel, but perhaps you're only Charity and this is the Palace Beautiful,' said Peter.

'You dear little boy,' she answered him. There was something irresistible in his words.

She was a great lady, one of the proudest on the earth, and he was only a little tramp, but she stooped down now, and kissed him on his pale lips.

'I'd like to be Charity,' she answered, 'and I'd like you to find this house the Palace Beautiful. Poor, queer little boy!—Is he quite right, little girl?' she added, looking again more attentively at Loo.

'They say he ain't, ma'am, but I think he is.'

'You should have kept your lions chained,' said Peter. He was now well enough to sit up. He looked very gravely at the lady; he was not at all discomposed by her notice of him. 'They kept the lions chained when Christian was having his turn,' continued Peter, 'and you didn't do right to let them be loose.'

'Twas only a dog,' said Loo; 'and you shouldn't make so free, Peter.'

Pete didn't take the least notice of Loo; he struggled feebly to his feet and shook himself.

'Shall we come into the house now and have some rest?' he said, holding out his hand to the lady.

'Yes, yes; and you must have something to eat,' she replied.—'You can follow me, little girl,' she continued, looking at Loo.

The lady held Peter's hand, and led him silently up the broad, low steps which lay in front of the mansion. The big doors were partly open, and Peter and the lady passed through. Loo followed with a beating heart. As soon as they got inside the doors, they found themselves in a very large, square hall, completely lined with old oak beautifully carved in the shape of all sorts of animals and flowers. There was a great hearth in the

middle of the hall, on which a huge fire made of logs burned, and standing by the hearth was a tall man, with iron-gray hair and a keen, hawk-like face.

'Well, Dorothy?' he exclaimed at the sight of his daughter. 'My dear child, whom have you with you?'

'Such a funny little pair, father,' answered Lady Dorothy. 'This boy says he is a pilgrim. The girl is his sister, and she is quite devoted to him.—What is my name, boy?' continued the young lady, bending down and looking into Pete's face.

Loo felt abashed and nervous at the grandeur of the place, at Lord Staunton's stately words, and even at Lady Dorothy's gentle tones; but nothing was ever known to abash Peter.

'Who am I?' said the young lady, smiling into the boy's eyes.

He threw back his head and answered simply, 'You're Charity, and this is the Palace Beautiful. I'm hungry, and I'd like something to eat, please, Charity.'

'My dear, what a strange boy!' exclaimed her father.

'Strange? Why, he is the dearest little fellow I've met for many a day,' answered the young

lady.—'Come along, Peter; Charity will give you a right good meal.—Come, little girl; although you are not a pilgrim, I suppose you want something to eat, too.'

'Please, ma'am,' answered Loo. She thought of Joe and Paul Pry, and wondered how they were faring; but she had not time to devote many thoughts to them just then, for Lady Dorothy took the children down several passages, all beautifully warmed, and full of all sorts of lovely things, until at last they turned into a cosy little room, where an old lady with snow-white hair sat by a bright fire.

'Mrs Perkins,' said Lady Dorothy, addressing the old woman, who stood up at once and dropped a very respectful curtsy, 'I have brought a dear little boy and his sister for you to be specially kind to. Please give them the nicest meal you can, and don't let them go away until I have seen them again.'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

PRUDENCE.

RS PERKINS promised to obey. She stared

at the children as she spoke. She was a somewhat stern-looking old lady, and hadn't nearly so kind a voice as Lady Dorothy. She knew, however, that it was as much as her place was worth to disregard that beautiful young lady's slightest order, and she invited Loo and

'I'll come in presently, Perkins, and see how the poor little things are faring,' said Lady Dorothy.

Pete to come and warm themselves by her fire.

She nodded brightly to Peter, whose gray eyes were still fixed on her face, and went out of the room.

'You'd like a wash, maybe, children?' said Mrs Perkins when she found herself alone with them. 'You're very messy and dirty to be in a grand house like this. Oh, of course, I know that Lady Dorothy is Lady Dorothy; but I don't see, all the same, why I'm to have tramps to sit down in my

nice room and have lunch with me. There's a room just here where you can wash your hands and face, girl, and perhaps you'll take the boy and do the same for him?'

'Thank you, ma'am,' answered Loo, who was trembling a good deal.

Mrs Perkins went to a bell, which she pulled vigorously. A nice little servant-girl appeared in a moment.

'Lucy,' said Mrs Perkins, 'these children are Lady Dorothy's latest fad. It is a boy and girl this time, Lucy; it was two old men last week, you remember? Will you take them to the room at the end of the passage, and see that they have a good wash before their lunch is served up?'

'Come this way, please,' said Lucy to Loo.

Loo took Peter's hand, and they immediately went out of the room. Lucy had a kinder face than Mrs Perkins; she provided the children with nice hot water, and scented soap, and clean towels. She then took a brush and comb out of a drawer, and when Loo began to wash Peter and to smarten him up, as she expressed it, Lucy helped her.

'He's a dear little boy,' said Lucy, falling in love, as every one else did, with Peter's sweet face.

Peter, after all, was only the son of a poor

woman, but he might have been a gentleman as far as looks were concerned. He possessed the easy grace of a child who never thinks of himself. His mind was preoccupied; it was filled with a very grand and ennobling thought. Mistaken as all his ideas were, the essence of the truth was in them. Pete did not mind what hardships he went through if he could only escape from the City of Destruction and reach the Celestial City. He took all the attentions that his pretty face entitled him to in the calmest possible manner. When he returned to Mrs Perkins's little room, he walked straight up to her and took one of her wrinkled hands in his.

'I know your name,' he said; 'you're Prudence. You're not half so nice as Charity.'

'My word, what a queer little boy!' exclaimed Mrs Perkins. 'So I'm Prudence, child? Well, I was never called by that name before, and I'm not so nice as Charity, am I? Who's Charity, if I may ask?'

'The beautiful lady in white who brought me here is Charity,' said Peter. 'I haven't seen Piety yet, but I suppose she'll come into the room presently. You're much older than Charity, aren't you, Prudence, although you are her sister?'

'Gracious me!' exclaimed Mrs Perkins, jumping

to her feet. 'Why, it is perfectly wicked to hear you speak, boy. I sister to the beautiful Lady Dorothy Staunton? Now, look here, child, you'd better stop chattering if you can only talk nonsense of that sort.'

'You all call it nonsense,' said Peter in a distressed voice. 'It's very, very queer, when it's in a printed book, too.' He dropped on to a little stool which stood by the hearth as he spoke, and looked into the glowing fire with tears filling his eyes. 'You believe it leastways,' he said, turning to his sister. 'You see it's all as true as possible. We left the City of Destruction yesterday, and we found the Wicket-Gate, and we spent last night at the house of Mr and Mrs Interpreter, and now we're at the Palace Beautiful. I can't see how any one can help believing it.'

'Dear me!' said Mrs Perkins. 'Now I begin to see daylight. That child has got the *Pilgrim's Progress* on his brain. Well, it is a beautiful book; I used to find wonderful comfort out of it when I was young.'

'Do you know it, ma'am? Do you know about the pilgrimage?' said Loo. 'Can you tell us the real, real truth about it?'

'Why, of course, child. Where were you reared?

—That boy talks like a heathen, or like a child that ain't quite right in his head. Didn't they tell you the true meaning of the *Pilgrim's Progress* at Sunday-school, little girl?'

'No, ma'am, they never did,' answered Loo.

'Well, I never heard of such a thing,' answered Mrs Perkins. 'I never did hold with modern education. The three R's—reading, writing, and 'rithmetic—were enough when I was young. Somehow or other, they managed to get the *Pilgrim's Progress* into the three R's, small as they're thought now. Well, my dears, pilgrims or not, here comes dinner, and I suppose you are inclined to eat?'

'Oh, aren't we just!' said Peter, rising and approaching the table.

'Sit down there, my dear,' said Mrs Perkins, 'and I will help you. Here's nice roast chicken. Will you have roast chicken or stewed mutton, little-pilgrim boy?'

Peter looked carefully at the chicken. 'I'll have some of that,' he said.

He had never seen roast chicken in all his life before. Mrs Perkins helped him and Loo. They had roast chicken and bread sauce, and nicely frizzled bacon, and potatoes, and greens; and they ate their dinner off china plates, and cut up their meat with the aid of silver forks and knives, which bore the impress of the best cutlery in the world. The meat course was followed by pudding. The dinner was quite as much enjoyed as that which they ate at the farm.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

APPLES.

EANWHILE Joe found it rather tiresome standing about on the roadside waiting for Loo and Peter to appear. Joe was terribly hungry. He could feed Paul

Pry, it is true, helping him to many juicy and dainty roots which grew close by, but there was nothing at all anywhere near that poor Joe himself could eat. He began to forget the nice breakfast which he had enjoyed in the barn early that morning, and to think longingly of the moment when Loo would reappear and go to the village with him, and get him some bread and perhaps a lump of cheese for his dinner. Why did she not come back? What an age she and Peter were away! Surely they had never been so silly as to go up to the house which must stand somewhere beyond those wide white gates! Joe felt cross, and shuffled his heels about as he watched impatiently for their return. Presently a village lad, a rough-looking boy very little bigger than himself, appeared in view. Joe called out to him.

'Hullo!' he said.

'Hullo to you,' answered the village boy.

'Can you tell me,' said Joe, 'who lives inside them gates?'

'Who lives inside those white gates?' answered the boy. 'Why, Lord Staunton, of course. Where did you come from that you don't know that?'

'I come from London,' answered Joe. 'My word! I suppose he's a big swell?'

'That he be,' answered the boy. 'Well, I can't waste any more words with you; I'm off home to my dinner.'

Joe could not help sighing as he heard the boy utter these last words. He pressed his hand against his thin figure, and tried the often-resorted-to experiment of tightening his belt.

'It won't do,' he said presently to himself. 'There, it's at me again, gnawing and gnawing! It's awful, awful what hunger does. What am I to do? How am I to bear it? I do wish that Loo would make haste and come back!'

There was no sign of Loo, however. Joe went and stood where he could look inside the gates, but, peep as he would, he could not catch the most APPLES. 239

distant sight of her little figure, nor Peter's, anywhere about.

Lord Staunton's property extended a good way along the road, and just at this part was guarded by high walls. Joe walked dismally along a narrow path outside the walls. Presently he came to a spot where the wall was lower and he could get a good peep into the grounds. His eyes suddenly brightened, and a look of expectation and longing filled them. Just inside, where the wall was low, he could see heaps and heaps of apple-trees, heavily laden with ripe red and golden fruit. Like all boys, Joe particularly loved apples. How much more than ever would be appreciate one now! He was starving! How delicious a crisp, fresh apple would feel as he crunched it with his firm, white teeth! Joe was a thief by profession; he was clever and agile. At the sight of the apple-trees he forgot all his resolutions; with easy skill he scaled the wall, and the next moment had dropped down softly into the long grass which covered the orchard. He went up to the nearest tree and quietly picked the choicest and ripest apples and stuffed them into his pockets; then he sat down at the root of the tree and began to eat them as fast as ever he could. He had seldom been more hungry

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in his life, and had never before tasted delicious apples fresh from the trees. In his delight he even forgot Paul Pry, who skipped and bounded off by himself, much enjoying this return to liberty and unlimited munching away at green, juicy grass.

Poor Joe's bliss, however, was destined to be short-lived. He had just finished his fourth apple, and was beginning on his fifth, when a harsh voice sounded above his head. He started, jumped to his feet, and prepared to fly.

'None of this, you young vagabond!' called out an angry voice.

A big, rough-looking man in a fustian suit caught Joe with a firm grip on the shoulder, turned him fiercely round, felt his bulging pockets, and, putting in his hand, quickly emptied them of the apples.

'Ah, I have caught you, you young thief!' he exclaimed. 'Now then, you don't suppose you'll escape me? Off you march to the village police-court. I'll give you in charge, you young villain; see if I don't.'

'Oh! please let me go this time, sir,' pleaded Joe. 'I was that hungry, and the apples they looked so good. I'm only a London boy, sir, and I'll promise never to steal any more.'

'Only a London boy!' said the irate keeper.

'And do you suppose we want London tramps in Lord Staunton's private grounds? I'll see that you go back to London, and not in the way you like, you young scamp! Now, no more words—off you come!'

'At any rate, let me catch Paul Pry, sir,' said Joe.

'Paul Pry? So there's another of you about? Oh, won't you catch it hot?'

'Paul's a rabbit, sir, and he's loose in the grass.'

'Then you've been poaching as well as stealing? See what the magistrate says to you to-morrow morning!'

'May I tell Loo and Peter before you lock me up?'

'Not another word; off you come this minute.'

Keeping a very firm hold of Joe, the burly man in the fustian suit marched him quickly through the orchard, and, opening a small postern-gate in the wall, proceeded to take him to the village. Poor Joe felt quite stunned. With all his recklessness, his bold and fearless picking and stealing, this was the first time he had really found himself in the clutches of the law. The unfamiliar aspect of the country alarmed him far more than the well-known London streets. What should he do? What

Peter.

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would become of him? Paul Pry was lost. Loo and Peter had disappeared. What would they think when they returned to the roadside and saw no trace of him? He had been very happy with Loo and Peter. All things considered, yesterday and this morning had been the very happiest time of his whole life. Now all was blackness and despair. Why had he forgotten his promise to Loo? Why had he yielded to the pangs of hunger and stolen the fruit?

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TAKEN TO THE LOCK-UP.

HEN they reached the village, Joe turned round and looked into the face of his captor.

'I don't want to escape,' he said; 'you may clutch me as tight as you like. I'm to be locked up in a minute or two, I suppose?'

'Of course you are. You'll have plenty of time to kick your heels in the place I'm taking you to, you young scamp!'

'There ain't a bit of use in calling me names,' said Joe. 'Of course I did wrong to steal, but maybe if you were as peckish, you'd have took a few apples too.'

'Now, none of your sauce, you young varmint!'

'I ain't meaning it for sauce,' said poor Joe. 'I was awful peckish, and I took the apples. I don't mean for to deny it.'

'As if you could, you scamp, when I caught you in the act!'

'Well, sir, I wish you'd let me say a thing. I'm willing to take my punishment patient. I'm a bad lot, I know, and I don't pretend I'm anything else. I came from London yesterday with a little girl called Loo, and a boy—a perky little chap, white-faced, with big eyes, what goes by the name of Pete; and the boy had a pet rabbit what he called Paul Pry. The boy's a bit queer, and he made the girl take him into Lord Staunton's place, but I stayed outside with the rabbit. They were a long time gone, and I was mighty hungry, and I saw the apples, and I took them.'

'That's a long yarn,' interrupted the keeper, 'but I don't see what it has to do with me. If two tramps got inside Lord Staunton's avenue, they'll soon be turned out again.'

'Well, they haven't come back,' said Joe. 'I watched for them till I was tired.'

'How long did you say they were gone?' said the keeper.

'Oh, it's near an hour and a half.'

'My word! I wonder'—— exclaimed the keeper.

'Please, sir,' said Joe, 'do you know what has come to them?'

'No, lad, that I can't tell—unless Lady Dorothy has taken them up. She does the queerest things,

does Lady Dorothy; and if she have'—— Here the keeper paused, and his tones quite changed. 'I must lock you up, boy,' he said, 'for you're a thief; but if Lady Dorothy intercedes—anyhow, if so be as she's took up them young uns, I'll take a message from you to them.'

'Oh, will you, sir—will you?' said Joe. 'Oh! thank you.'

'Yes; I'll tell 'em what you've done,' said the keeper, still speaking in a surly voice. 'Well, this is the police-station.—Here, Sergeant Bailey, here's a case for you. This lad hails from London, and I found him in his lordship's orchard stealing apples as hard as ever he could, the young scamp!'

'You caught him in the act?' said the policeman, taking out his case-book as he spoke.

'Yes; to be sure. I'm ready to swear to that.'

'Well, boy, we must take you to the lock-up,' said the policeman.

'I don't mind,' answered Joe. He felt greatly relieved at knowing that Loo would be told of his present quarters. 'I don't mind where I am if I have something to eat.'

'Hold your tongue, now,' said Sergeant Bailey, 'and only answer when questions is put to you. What's your name?'

- 'Joe.'
- 'Well, I suppose you're called more than Joe. What else?'
- 'I forgot,' answered Joe. 'Joe Carter's my name.'
 - 'And where do you hail from?'
 - 'London.'
 - 'What part?'
 - 'Brick Street, Covent Garden.'
 - 'When did you come from London?'
 - 'Yesterday.'

The policeman entered these particulars in his book; he then laid his hand on Joe's shoulder, whirled him round abruptly, and conducted him to the lock-up.

The keeper, Saunders by name, strolled back in the direction of The Beeches, Lord Staunton's place. He walked slowly up the avenue, pondering many things in his mind. He had a great hatred of tramps. This hatred was shared by Lord Staunton. Lord Staunton was most particular to keep such individuals out of his grounds. Unfortunately Lady Dorothy had quite opposite views on these matters. She was much interested in hungry and poor people; she had been known to bring quite disreputable men and women from the road-

side up to The Beeches—had fed, clothed, and cheered them, and sent them on their way again strengthened and rejoicing. But, of all the many folk that Lady Dorothy had rescued, none had interested her so much as the little fair boy with the dark-gray eyes, the fearless manner, and the extraordinary ideas in his head. She felt more flattered at being called Charity, and being supposed to live in the Palace Beautiful, than she had ever been in her life before. While Loo and Peter were enjoying their delicious dinner in the housekeeper's room, Lady Dorothy was entertaining her father with a graphic account of Peter's words and Loo's distress when the foxhound had knocked him down.

'Now, you know, Dorothy,' said Lord Staunton as he rose from the luncheon-table, 'that you have been deceived over and over again in these people. We have a great many valuable things at The Beeches, and really, my dear child, although I don't wish to discourage you, I should be very much distressed and alarmed if burglars came here.'

'But, surely, father,' exclaimed Lady Dorothy, 'that dear little boy cannot by any possibility be considered a burglar?'

'Granted, my love; but, although not a burglar himself, he may be a trap for one. I must say I

don't like the look of the girl. Her black eyes have a fierce expression in them. I wish, Dorothy, that you would get rid of the children as soon as possible after lunch. Give them a little money if you like, but for goodness' sake, my love, send them off the premises. Oh! I see Saunders coming up the avenue. I wonder what it is now. I will just go and speak to him.'

'I think Saunders is a great deal too hard on poor people,' said Lady Dorothy. 'He is always bringing us stories of something or other that has gone wrong. I will go with you if you please, father, while you speak to him.'

'As you like, my love.'

Lady Dorothy slipped her hand through her father's arm, and they went out into the sunshine together.

'Good-afternoon, Saunders,' said Lord Staunton. 'Have you come to speak to me?'

'I have, your lordship.'

Saunders doffed his hat, and looked uneasily at Lady Dorothy. She fixed her calm blue eyes on him, which distressed him a good deal.

'Well, Saunders, speak up,' said Lord Staunton.

'I have only come to tell your lordship that I have just caught a boy stealing apples in the

orchard. I walked him straight off to the lock-up, and he'll be had up before the magistrate to-morrow. He tells me that he is companion of two children that got into the avenue, by some means or other, an hour or two ago.'

'Ah!' said Lord Staunton; 'now, Dorothy!'

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CHARITY TO THE RESCUE.

ADY DOROTHY did not speak at all for a moment. Her father's look of triumph was quite lost upon her. Then she said abruptly:

'I don't see that the fact of a poor boy having taken some apples when he was very hungry need prevent my being kind to the two little children who are now at The Beeches.'

'Well, Dorothy, this is really past bearing!' exclaimed Lord Staunton.

'Please, father, have patience with me; I will go and fetch the children and see what they have got to say for themselves.'

Pete and Loo, having finished their delicious dinner, were now seated by the housekeeper's fire. Mrs Perkins had even found something for Loo to do, and when Lady Dorothy peeped her bright face round the door she saw Peter looking over a large book full of pictures, and Loo busily un-

picking some white aprons which Mrs Perkins was altering for herself.

'Oh, here you are, you good little people!' exclaimed the young lady in her pleasant voice. 'I hope you're no longer hungry?'

'Oh, no, ma'am, thank you; we'd a lovely dinner,' said Loo, rising and dropping a curtsy.

'Is that you, Charity?' said Peter. 'We're very much obliged, and you've been real nice to us—real nice; and so has Prudence. I haven't seen Piety yet, but perhaps she'll come and speak to us before we go. We've had a very lovely dinner, and I like sitting by Prudence's fire and looking at her pictures; but we must be going on, mustn't we, Loo?'

'Of course we must,' said Loo; 'there's Joe to think of, and the rabbit, Paul Pry.'

'I expect I know something about Joe,' said Lady Dorothy. 'Poor boy! I'm really sorry for him. Is he a friend of yours, little pilgrim?' she continued, fixing her frank eyes on Peter.

'He's another pilgrim,' said Peter; 'he's going to the Celestial City, same as me and Loo and Paul Pry.'

'Well, you must come out, both of you, and tell my father about him,' said Lady Dorothy. 'Come, I will show you the way.—I am very much obliged to you, Mrs Perkins; you have been particularly nice about this.'

'May I kiss you, Prudence, before I go?' said Peter.

'Poor little fellow, to be sure you may,' said Mrs Perkins. 'Poor child! it's a sin that such as you should be tramping the roads when it's in bed you ought to be.'

'I wonder why every one thinks I ought to be in bed?' said Peter. 'Mrs Interpreter said so, and now you worry me with the same silly nonsense, Prudence. I'm quite well, I tell you!'

'Come with me now, little boy,' said Lady Dorothy. She gave her hand to Peter, who took it willingly, and a moment or two later they all found themselves in front of the house, where Lord Staunton and the keeper Saunders were awaiting them.

'You had better speak to the children, Saunders,' said Lord Staunton, who, much as he disapproved of Lady Dorothy's ways, hated thwarting her in any fashion.

Saunders looked doubtful. With Lady Dorothy's blue eyes on him, he did not like the job.

'Go on, Saunders. Why do you hesitate?' said his lordship firmly.

Thus admonished, Saunders began his task immediately.

'See here, you two young tramps'-

'I don't wish the children to be called tramps!' said Lady Dorothy.

'Well, whatever you are—you two young beggars, then—see here, you left a boy on the road—one of your party.'

'Of course we did; we left Joe Carter and Paul Pry on the road,' said Peter.

'Well, that precious Joe Carter of yours got into his lordship's orchard, and began stealing apples as fast as he could. Now, you tell me if that's proper conduct or not?'

'Of course it isn't,' said Loo, whose eyes began to flash; 'and Joe promised faithful he wouldn't steal—oh, how could he? Oh, I'm quite ashamed! And he promised!—he promised!'

'But perhaps the poor boy was very hungry; and, after all, they were only apples,' said Lady Dorothy.

'Dorothy, your morals would corrupt a whole country,' said her father; but Lady Dorothy noticed that there was a little twinkle in his left eye.

'I know Joe was awful hungry,' said Loo; 'he had nothing to eat since quite early this morning. I have some money—not much, but some—and I said we'd go to the village and have a meal; but Pete here would say that this was Palace Beautiful, and that you were Charity, and he wouldn't stir a

step until he came here. I coaxed, and Joe coaxed, but Pete would have his way, so Joe sat by the roadside to rest, and we came here. The woman at the lodge didn't want us to pass, but we hid in the thicket, and came right up the avenue; then we met you, kind lady, and the dog ran at Pete, and you were real good—wonderful good! Oh! I'm miserable to think as Joe should have stolen them apples—I'm ashamed—I'm bitter ashamed!'

'Well, he's in the lock-up now,' said the keeper.
'I caught him in the act, and he'll be up before the magistrate to-morrow. Is he your brother, child?'

'No,' answered Loo, 'he's no relation; but, oh! please,' she added, turning suddenly to Lord Staunton, 'he has never been taught no better. Poor Joe, he ain't good, and he was hungry. If I'd been with him he wouldn't have stole. Oh, please, sir, don't send him to prison! Don't, don't, please, kind sir!'

'You'd better say "your ludship" when you speak to Lord Staunton, said Saunders.

'Please, ludship, don't send him to prison,' said Loo, whose ideas with regard to the aristocracy were decidedly vague.

'I think, father,' interrupted Lady Dorothy, 'that

this poor boy's case is scarcely one for the magistrate to take up. I hope you will let me go down to the village with these two dear little children, and have a talk with him.'

'Oh, yes, please, Charity, that would be so like you!' said Peter, taking her hand and fondling it as he spoke.

'Keep off, you little tramp; you don't know who you're touching,' said Saunders, who could scarcely restrain himself with indignation.

'No, no; I wish to hold the little fellow's hand,' said Lady Dorothy. 'Father dear, you will let that poor boy be released if he promises'——

'On condition,' interrupted Lord Staunton, 'that he leaves this part of the country.'

'Well, of course, we'll all do that,' said Peter. 'We've to get to the Valley of Humiliation before long.'

Saunders held up both hands in dismay.

'Come, children,' said Lady Dorothy, 'I see my father is going to do exactly as I wish.—I will manage the children, father,' she added brightly; 'and you may rest assured that no more apples will be stolen.'

CHAPTER XL.

IN THE CHURCH.

ADY DOROTHY walked down to the village with the children. There she had an interview with the policeman in whose charge Joe was put. She assured him

that her father did not mean to prosecute, and that, in consequence, Joe might have his liberty.

'You will let him out at once, will you not, Mr Bailey?' she said, looking up into the face of the police sergeant.

Mr Bailey bowed, and said he'd be only too delighted to do anything to oblige Lady Dorothy.

'I am most grateful to you,' she said. 'And now I wonder if you will do something more for me? I want this poor boy to have a good meal. Is your wife at home? Do you think she will give him something to eat?'

'She can't abide tramps, Lady Dorothy, but she'd do more than that for your ladyship.'

'I shall be most grateful to her; please see to it

at once, Mr Bailey, and let the boy join us just outside the church in a quarter of an hour's time.

—Now, children, come along; I want to take you into the church; perhaps you would like to hear me play on the organ while you are waiting.'

'Will you play the tune that goes to "Onward, Christian Soldiers," Charity?' asked Peter.

'Do you like that hymn very much, little Peter?' asked Lady Dorothy.

Peter gave her a glance full of surprise.

'Of course I do,' he replied. 'Ain't I a Christian soldier marching as to war?'

'I believe you are, little lad,' said the young lady. 'Well, come into the church and hear me play.'

It was while Lady Dorothy was playing and Peter was listening, with a lump in his throat which gave him a queer feeling of both pain and pleasure, that an idea came into Loo's practical head. Lady Dorothy was evidently very unlike other people—she was kind to poor children in a way and after a fashion which Loo had never dreamt of before.

'She reminds me something of the lovely lady who gave me the half-crown,' thought the young girl to herself. 'I know what I'll do. Pete thinks he's on pilgrimage, and nothing nor nobody can get the notion out of his head. I'll just tell Lady Dorothy

everything, and ask her if I might have a little place in the village, and if Pete and I may stay here for a bit. Of course, poor Joe must stay with us too, unless Lady Dorothy can think of something better to do with him.'

Peter sat in one of the pews of the church. His eyes were fixed on a beautiful painted window which represented an angel with outspread wings and a tender face. The angel seemed to Peter to be beckoning him, and he thought it very likely that the look on the face resembled that of the angel who would come presently to help him up from the cold waters of the river to the gates of the Celestial City; his lips moved faintly as he looked at the angel and listened to Lady Dorothy's spirited singing. The music rolled out in grand peals from the organ, and filled the little church. Loo slipped out of her seat by Peter's side, and went up straight to where the lady sat.

'If you please,' she said when the hymn was over, 'may I tell you something?'

'Of course you may, Loo,' answered Lady Dorothy in her pleasantest voice. 'I quite meant to ask you a lot of questions. Come and sit in this pew and let us talk.'

Loo felt a queer mingling of both shyness and

gladness; her heart was drawn out to Lady Dorothy as it had never been drawn out to mortal before. She found it quite possible to tell her about those feelings which lay deep down in her breast: her great passionate love for little Peter, her jealousy of Mary Holland, her love for Joe too. The story of Paul Pry and Peter's illness, the story of Joe and the diamond ring, her mother's trouble and loss of their little home, she told Lady Dorothy. Also all about their starting on pilgrimage; of their stay at the Murrays' farm, and Mrs Murray's goodness to Peter, and the words in which she had told Loo that there was no real pilgrimage.

While she spoke Lady Dorothy listened with that quiet yet interested expression which helps the teller of a story more than anything else.

'And, oh! kind lady,' said Loo in conclusion, 'if Pete is told that there's no pilgrimage, and no Wicket-Gate, and no Palace Beautiful, and no Celestial City, it'll kill him just. Oh, what is to be done? I can't lose little Pete, lady, for he's all I've got—all I've got!'

'But we needn't tell him this,' said Lady Dorothy when Loo had finished her story, 'for it is all true—there is a Wicket-Gate, and a beautiful Celestial City at the end of the road. It is true, little girl,

'Yes, lady, I don't tell lies,' said Loo in a solemn voice.

'Well, I'll help you; I know some one in the village who would do anything in the world to oblige me. I'm afraid I can't ask her to take in Joe, but she shall give you and Peter a bed for the night, and I will see what can be done for Joe. I know a place where he can be lodged until we make inquiries about him. Now, there is no time to lose; come with me. I know Miss Price will be kind to you. She is a very funny old woman, but a very kind old woman also. Come along; we'll arrange the matter at once.'

'Come, Peter,' said Loo, going up to her brother.

'I thought you were a long time talking,' said Peter; 'are we going to start now, Loo? I do love Charity, but we ought to go on; we oughtn't to wait any longer.' 'Listen to me, Peter,' said Lady Dorothy; 'you call me Charity, and I hope I have some title to the name. Now, you are a pilgrim, and I think it is only right that a little pilgrim like you should obey the words and the wishes of a grave and old Charity like me. I want you to stay the night here, Peter, and I know a very nice woman who will give you and Loo a bed. I am going to speak to her now, and you must come with me.'

'But I want to get to the Valley of Humiliation to-night,' said Peter; 'it is such a pity to delay; it will make the journey so long.'

'No, you must not go to-night; it is too late. You must come with me. Here, take my hand.'

Peter looked wistful and uncertain. Of course, it might be very wrong of him to disobey Charity, but he was not sure; he was in a hurry to get on—still, perhaps Charity was right.

Lady Dorothy hurried out of the church, and in a few moments' time had made arrangements with Miss Price to receive the children.

'The little boy wants to be humoured,' said the young lady, calling the old woman aside for a minute or two. 'I want you to keep the children for the present, Miss Price, until I can write to some friends of mine in town to make inquiries about them. If

I find their story is true, I may do something for them both, for I never before saw any one quite so queer and interesting as this little Peter.'

'Ah, Lady Dorothy, all people who are poor and hungry are interesting to you,' said Miss Price.

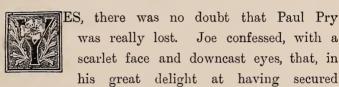
'I hope so,' she replied; 'but it is so sweet to hear him call me Charity, and I do so long to deserve the name. The little girl will help you, Miss Price, with your household work, and you will have more time to go on doing that hemming and stitching which no one else in the whole place can attempt. Now I must see what can be done with Joe. I think we must manage to give him a bed at the Boys' Rest for to-night.'

Lady Dorothy walked down the sunlit village street. Peter and Loo stood on Miss Price's doorstep and watched her. Joe came shambling up the street to meet the young lady.

'Oh,' said Peter with a sharp cry, 'he hasn't never got Paul Pry with him! What is to be done?'

CHAPTER XLL

NO PILGRIMAGE.



something to eat, he had forgotten all about Paul, who had slipped away by himself, and had probably long ago joined some of his brother bunnies in Lord Staunton's extensive warren close by. Both Pete and Loo looked extremely sad when they heard that their pet had disappeared; but even Lady Dorothy, who would have done anything in her power to comfort Peter, could hold out no hope of recovering his favourite rabbit again.

'One rabbit looks exactly like another in a warren,' she said, 'and, although I dare say I could get you a rabbit to pet and love, I certainly could not promise that the rabbit would be your old friend Paul Pry.'

'I don't want no other rabbit,' said Peter; 'he was going on pilgrimage, and I thought he'd be so

happy by-and-by, and that there'd be nobody to shoot him nor be unkind to him in the Celestial City; but I suppose it don't matter, and, anyhow, it ain't your fault, Charity.'

As Peter said these last words, he turned and walked slowly back to the little cottage where Miss Price was waiting to receive him. Loo thanked Lady Dorothy for her kindness, and followed Peter indoors. Joe was also provided for that night, and, all things considered, Loo felt that they were having great luck on their pilgrimage. She had taken a great fancy to beautiful and kind Lady Dorothy, and felt almost sure, as she prepared to go to bed that evening, that this wonderful young lady would manage to tell Peter the truth, and get him to give up the wild scheme on which his whole little mind was set. Peter and Loo were to sleep in a tiny room just off Miss Price's kitchen. As Loo laid her tired head on the pillow, Peter raised himself from the cot in which he was to sleep, and looked across at his sister.

'It's not in the printed book,' he said; 'there's nothing about Miss Price in the printed book. The whole pilgrimage has turned out beautiful so far, only that dear little Paul Pry is lost, but there's nothing about Miss Price in the printed book.'

'Look here, Peter,' said Loo suddenly; 'was there anything about a rabbit going on pilgrimage in the printed book?'

Peter thought hard for a moment.

'I can't recollect,' he said, 'whether Mary Holland read anything about bunnies—maybe that's why he's lost—maybe they don't go on pilgrimage, Loo.'

'Very like they don't,' answered Loo; 'and if that's the case, Peter, you may be quite sure that Paul Pry is a deal happier with the other bunnies in Lord Staunton's warren than he was hugged up in my arms or Joe's—and, oh dear, he was a mighty weight! I don't think, somehow, he was a good sort of animal for Mary Holland to choose; I think we're best rid of him, Pete.'

'Don't think any more of him now,' said Peter.

'Let's go to sleep as fast as ever we can, for we must be up early, very early in the morning.'

'No, no, we can't start until we see Lady Dorothy,' said Loo, in some alarm.

'Did Charity say that?' asked Peter.

'She said she'd come down to see us to-morrow morning,' answered Loo; 'and, of course, it would be bitter unkind to go away without saying "goodbye" and thanking her.'

'But we didn't say "good-bye" to Mrs Interpreter.'

- 'No more we didn't; but she's quite different.'
- 'I don't see that; I loved her very much.'
- 'Well, think of Lady Dorothy's kindness,' answered Loo, 'and she's such a grand lady.'

'There's nothing in that,' answered Peter. 'She's kind because we're pilgrims. I love her; she's splendid, and Palace Beautiful's a nice house; but we must be getting on to the Valley of Humiliation first thing in the morning, so I hope she'll come early, that we may not waste time.'

Having said this, Peter laid his head on his pillow, and was soon sound asleep.

Loo, however, could not sleep; she was disturbed by many things. She knew now perfectly well that there was no such thing as going on real pilgrimage; she also knew that it would take a very clever person indeed to undeceive Peter. She had told her whole story to Lady Dorothy, and if Peter would only be guided by that kind lady, then things would go as well as possible. Joe would not be unhappy, for Lady Dorothy would certainly do something for him; and Loo might get a nice little place in the country, and perhaps Peter might live with her; and by-and-by, when their mother had earned enough money, she might leave London and come and join them. Yes, all would be well and beautiful and

happy if only Peter would give up this craze of being a pilgrim.

'Nobody can persuade him if Lady Dorothy can't,' thought Loo. 'I'll ask her in the morning. When the morning comes I'll beg of her to speak to Peter—she's so beautiful and kind, perhaps he'll believe her.'

Thinking these thoughts, Loo at last dropped off into the land of dreams. She was still sound asleep when Peter opened his eyes, raised himself in bed, and looked around him. The sun was shining right into the tiny bedroom, and Peter heard Miss Price moving about in her small room overhead. Presently she came down the narrow, creaking stairs, and began putting her kitchen in order. Peter heard her raking out and cleaning her stove, and then he heard the wood crackling as she lighted the fire. After a time a door was opened, and Peter could hear Miss Price's voice calling out to somebody else in a high, cracked, but cheerful tone.

'Is that you, Mrs Bodkin? Have the goodness to shut the door, then, ma'am, for it's nipping cold at this hour of the morning.'

'I thought maybe you'd like some radishes, Miss Price,' answered the other woman, 'so I have brought you over a bundle.'

'Thank you. Well, I'll have a ha'p'orth.'

'Maybe the London children will relish them,' said Mrs Bodkin.

'Maybe,' replied the voice of Miss Price.

'It's wonderful how kind Lady Dorothy is,' said the other woman. 'I know she paid for that thief boy's lodging for the night at "the Rest;" they say she's going to try to get him into a reformatory of some sort.'

'My word! I never saw a lady like her,' said Miss Price.

'What do you think she'll do with the two children you have here?' asked Mrs Bodkin.

'Oh, how can I say?' replied Miss Price. 'The boy isn't right in his head. He's got a craze that he's a pilgrim; you never heard such rubbish in all your life. And he calls our Lady Dorothy nothing but Charity, and she's as pleased when he says it as if she was made Queen of England. I think the girl is a good sort, and maybe Lady Dorothy will get a little place for her. As to the boy, perhaps I'll have the care of him for a few days until we know what's best to be done. There's one thing certain, he won't be let wander the country on this pilgrimage fad any longer. Think of him going to Lord Staunton's yesterday and calling it the Palace Beautiful!'

'My word!' said Mrs Bodkin, 'they have patience to stand it.'

'And poor Mrs Perkins—she was nothing but Prudence. Dear, dear! poor innocent child, I never heard tell of such a thing in all my life. But there, Mrs Bodkin, you mustn't keep me any more; I have to get the children's breakfast, and have the kitchen all tidied up against Lady Dorothy comes.'

'Well, good-morning to you, neighbour,' answered Mrs Bodkin; and Peter, who had listened to every word of the conversation, heard the kitchen door slam behind her retreating footsteps.

The moment she had gone he sat up in bed and looked wistfully around him.

'They shan't stop me!' he said to himself wildly.

CHAPTER XLII.

RUNNING AWAY.

Peter scrambled to his feet, he turned white with anger and excitement. Was this to be the end, after all? Were those whom he loved and trusted only plotting

and planning against him? While they seemed to be so kind, were they in reality only laughing at him? Laughing! Peter caught his breath at the mere thought. Like all nervous, highly sensitive children, he could not bear the least approach to ridicule; he could stand anything but that. He was certainly not going to stand it now. He would go away at once from all these unkind people. If they didn't believe in pilgrimage, he did. Yes, he would run away! He would do the pilgrimage all by himself! Had not Christian gone on a long part of his journey all alone? Peter would do the same! Even Loo, whom he so dearly loved, had turned against him. Even Loo must now be left! When, by-and-by, he reached the Celestial City, he would

write to Loo, and tell her that he had overheard what Miss Price had said; that he had run away because he could not do otherwise; that he knew all along that there was a pilgrimage and a Celestial City; he had found it, and Loo must follow him as quickly as possible to the lovely home which he had reached.

Quickly scrambling into his clothes, and without venturing even to glance at his sister, who was still sound asleep, the little boy stole out of the tiny bedroom, and, when Miss Price's back was turned, ran out of the cottage.

He went out by the back way. It so happened that no one saw him go, and he was soon in the thick shelter caused by a growth of trees and shrubs which came up close to the back of the cottage. His excitement was still keeping him up, and he felt neither cold nor hunger. He had no money in his pocket, and he had forgotten to put the warm scarf round his neck which Loo was always careful to make him wear. At that early hour of the morning the air was full of hoar-frost; Peter noticed how pretty it looked glistening on leaf and tree. He noticed the beauty and the freshness, but was too full of longing to fulfil the great desire of his heart to have

any room for fear and discomfort, or hunger or cold, just then.

'Why, here's the Narrow Path!' he exclaimed, with a burst of delight, peering down as he spoke to look through the dewy grass and ferns.

He certainly saw a path which led uphill in a direction away from Miss Price's cottage. In an instant he had placed his feet on this path and had started forward. He walked quickly, and soon put a good distance between himself and the cottage. Had he gone by the high-road, he must have been quickly discovered and brought back; but no one thought of looking for him in the thick underwood which stretched for miles over this part of Lord Staunton's property.

He walked and walked until at last he was so tired that he had to sit down and rest. He had now got to a part of the undergrowth which skirted the high-road, and as the narrow path led in this direction, he presently found himself by a small turnstile, through which he passed, and so on into a wide, open common. He sat down again on the edge of the common and looked around him. He had passed the Palace Beautiful, and now, by right, he ought to be entering the Valley of Humiliation. He found himself on the

brow of a hill, and below him, to his great delight, he saw a wide, tranquil, richly clothed valley. Green meadows and trees covered the beautiful landscape, and the noise of running water reached Peter's ears. He was thirsty; he would go down into the valley and have a good drink. He rose to his feet, and, running eagerly forward, reached the gurgling stream. Going on his knees, he bent forward, and, making a scoop of his hand, filled it with water, and drank until his great thirst was abated.

He had just finished drinking when a loud voice sounded in his ears. He turned; a man on horse-back had stopped and was peering curiously at him.

'Why, if my sight don't deceive me, ain't you little Pete?' he exclaimed—'little Pete what's like our Sammy? Now, wherever have you dropped from, child?'

'Oh, Mr Interpreter!' said Peter, 'I am so glad to see you; and how is Mrs Interpreter? Is she quite well; and is that the Valley of Humiliation lying down yonder?'

'Yes, yes,' said the farmer, with a wink which Peter did not notice; 'of course that's the Valley of Humiliation, my fine lad. Suppose, now, you

get up in front of me, and I take you over there?'

'It would be very kind of you, Mr Interpreter,' said Peter, raising questioning eyes to the farmer's red face.

'Here, give me your two hands, and I'll lift you up. Why, you're a plucky little un! But, boy, you are as weak as a chicken. Why, what a white face! What would Mammy Murray say if she saw you like this?'

'Give her my love,' said Peter; 'tell her I'll write to her when I get to the Celestial City.'

'All right, laddie; I'm sure not to forget. Now you lean up against me, and I'll take you a good bit of the way; but, first of all, tell me where the others are—Loo, and that queer rough boy, and the bunny?'

'They are left behind,' said Peter; 'Paul Pry got lost yesterday, and Loo and Joe don't believe in no pilgrimage.'

'You don't say so! And you believe in it still?'

'In course I do!'

'You're the boy for me. Now, lean against me; you may sleep a bit if you like.'

The farmer jogged forward on his stout brown cob, and Peter, soothed and rested, wonderfully

glad in spite of himself to be once more under Mr Interpreter's wing, leant his whole weight against him, and presently dropped asleep.

'That's right,' muttered the red-faced man as he bent over him. 'Now then, Tommy, my boy, we'll turn our steps home as fast as ever we can trot. Won't the good wife be glad to see the little un once again! Why, she's done nothing but fret since they all stole a march on us yesterday. She will perk up when I bring the boy back. Oh! we'll manage to content him, see if we don't. Poor little chap! More and more like Sammy does he get each blessed minute. Why, he might have died if I hadn't had the luck to come across him.—Now then, sonny, here we are.'

'Is this the Valley?' began Peter, opening his eyes and rubbing them.

'No, no; it's Mammy Murray herself,' said a hearty voice; 'come into my arms, my poor little lamb.'

It was impossible for Peter to resist that kind voice, those loving tones, that motherly embrace. He gave a little sob when the farmer lifted him down from the cob's back. He had not an idea what had happened, but his whole heart went out to Mammy Murray.

CHAPTER XLIII.

'I'D BE GOOD FOR HER SAKE.'

HEN Loo awoke she looked around her with that puzzled sort of feeling which people know so well when they find themselves in an altogether unaccustomed

place. Loo had passed through so many adventures, however, during the last two or three days that she was not likely to be overcome by too much astonishment now.

'Are you awake, Pete?' she called.

There was no reply. She looked into Peter's bed, saw that it was empty, and, jumping up hastily, began to dress herself.

'Wherever has he gone?' she said to herself. 'He's sure to be about somewhere close to the house.'

When Loo entered Miss Price's little kitchen, that good woman was pouring hot porridge into a large dish which was placed on the centre of the table to receive it. A big jug of milk stood invitingly near, and little basins were placed round

the table as if for several people. Loo guessed immediately that she and Peter were expected to eat some of that delicious porridge for their breakfast; but who was that standing by the door? She gave a joyous cry and ran forward to clasp one of Joe's rough hands.

'Why, Joe, who sent you here?' she exclaimed.

'Lady Dorothy said that I was to come and breakfast with you, Loo,' answered Joe; 'she sent me a message last night, and here I be, and mighty peckish, too. That stuff smells real good, don't it, Loo?'

'Yes, prime!' answered Loo, smacking her lips.

'Breakfast is ready now, children,' said Miss Price, taking off her cooking-apron as she spoke, and drawing her chair up to the head of the table. 'You can place your own chairs, children,' she continued; 'you will find them handy by the wall. I have put brown sugar on the table; you will most likely fancy it with your porridge. Come along now, and fall to; porridge ain't fit to eat unless it's supped up hot as hot can be.'

'Please, Joe,' said Loo, 'call Peter in.'

'Peter! Where is he?' asked Joe. 'I ain't seen him anywhere.'

'He must be playing round somewhere,' said Loo.

'Just go and look for him, Joe; tell him break-fast's ready.'

Joe ran out of the cottage; he called Peter, at first quietly, then more loudly; in a moment or two he came back.

'He ain't nowhere to be seen!' he exclaimed.

'Oh, that child!' said Miss Price, with a little snap of her lips; 'most likely he's in the back-yard. I hope to mercy he ain't gone and fidgeted with my chickens. Here, I'd best go and search for him.'

She ran out, and her voice was heard loudly calling Peter's name. She returned in a moment with a blank face.

'I don't see him anywhere,' she said; 'he must have gone up a bit into the wood at the back of the house. He'll be back most likely in a few minutes. Now, you two eat your breakfast, and be quick about it. I'll keep some hot by the fire for the child. My word, what awful worries children are! Eat your porridge, you two, and don't stand gaping at me! A messenger has just been from Lady Dorothy. You are all to go up to her, instead of her coming here. So be quick over your food.'

'Yes, Loo, we'd best have our breakfast,' said

Joe. The temptation which that hot, smoking porridge presented was greater than the hungry boy could resist. He sat down in his chair and began devouring his portion in great mouthfuls. Loo, however, still stood upright.

'Sit down, girl, and eat your breakfast,' said Miss Price.

'I'd best go and have a look round for Pete, please, ma'am.'

'You shall go after you've finished your breakfast; not a step do you stir before. My word, this good food, which Lady Dorothy sent me her own self, to be thrown away! Eat, I say, and be quick about it; if you've time to spare, it's more than I have.'

Thus admonished, poor Loo felt there was no help for it; she sat down by Joe's side; but, hungry as she was, and delicious as Miss Price's porridge proved to be, each mouthful seemed only to choke her. She finished her bowl, and then rose hastily.

'I'm obliged, ma'am,' she said, 'but I must go out now to look for Pete.'

'Why can't you rest easy about that child? He's safe to come back in a minute or two.'

Loo's eyes filled with sudden tears.

'No, ma'am, he ain't,' said Loo. 'Pete ain't like other children; he's got a sort of craze in his head, ma'am. He's all full up of one thought, and one only. He's all for being a pilgrim, Pete is. He went off this morning, I'm quite sure, to continue his pilgrimage, and I must find him. Little Pete ain't strong; no, he ain't at all strong; and I must look for him. I must start off at once!'

'Well, then, look here,' said Miss Price; 'if things are as you say, you'll only waste your time running and racing all over the country, maybe going to the left, when, for aught you can tell, that child has gone to the right. No, I'll tell you what you'll do; you will just go straight up to Lady Dorothy and tell her the truth. Why, child, if it is as you say, she'll send men out on horseback to find your little brother; she'll tell the police that the child is lost. Oh, she'll have a thousand ways to get hold of the poor child. You go up and tell Lady Dorothy, if you are a wise child.'

'Yes, Loo, I'm sure Miss Price is right,' interrupted Joe.

'Very well,' said Loo, 'I'll go; I'll start at once.'

'And I'll go with you,' said Joe.

'That's right!' said Miss Price. 'If the child comes back, you may trust me to keep a firm grip on him till you return to the cottage; and if he don't come back, Lady Dorothy will soon find a way to make him. Now, run off, and don't lose no time, the pair of you.'

Joe held out his hand to Loo, and they quickly left the cottage. Loo had forgotten all about her hat; her mind was full of Pete; she had no time to think of anything else.

They soon reached the neighbourhood of the white lodge, where Loo and Pete had found themselves on the previous day. The woman whom they had managed to evade on that occasion came out again. She knew them now, however, and made no attempt to detain them.

'Some of Lady Dorothy's tramps,' Loo heard her say to her husband, who came out to stand by her side in the porch. 'There, children, go up to the house as fast as you can; you needn't be frightened, for Lady Dorothy has had all the dogs put up.'

'Even if the dogs were loose now, they wouldn't keep me back,' said Loo. 'Oh, little Pete, what can have become of you? Can you make out

where he's gone to, Joe? Oh, Joe, I'll die if little Pete is lost!'

'He ain't lost,' said Joe; 'he'll be found quickly enough when only Lady Dorothy knows. She's the most wonderful and most beautiful lady I ever saw; she'll find him quickly enough!'

Loo stared at Joe without replying. Joe's eyes were shining; there was an eager look in his face.

'I'd be good for her,' he said. 'There's nought I wouldn't do for her. I can't tell you how she makes me feel, Loo—sort of 'shamed of myself.'

'Well, let's hurry,' said Loo; 'let us get to her, and let us ask her what's to be done to find Peter.'

The avenue was long and winding, but the children presently reached the archway which led into the courtyard, and there, standing on the steps of the house, was Lady Dorothy herself, waiting to receive them.

She ran down the steps and came eagerly forward.

'Where is the little one?' she said. 'Where is little Peter?'

'Oh, lady, he's lost!' said Loo; 'he's lost!' She burst into sudden tears as she spoke.

'Stop crying, Loo,' said Lady Dorothy in her calm voice, 'and tell me exactly what is the matter.'

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE GOVERNESS-CART.

HERE was such a tone of authority in
Lady Dorothy's kind voice that Loo
found herself impelled to obey. Her
tears stopped flowing; she swallowed a

great lump in her throat, and, standing upright, said in a composed voice:

'Miss Price said that you'd know exactly how to find him, lady.'

'I will certainly do my best,' replied Lady Dorothy; 'but how has he managed to lose himself? I went down to see Miss Price late last evening, and she told me that both you and little Peter were asleep in bed. How did he lose himself?'

'It must have been all on account of the pilgrimage,' said Loo. 'He believes in it; he must have felt, somehow, that I wasn't going on pilgrimage any more, and he must have started off quite by himself. Oh, it must have been that! But where in the world has he gone?'

'We'll soon find him if that is really the case,' said Lady Dorothy in a cheerful tone. 'By the way, I wonder why Farmer Murray is riding up the avenue at this early hour?'

'Farmer Murray!' exclaimed Loo, turning round; then she gave a cry of pleasure. 'It's Mr Interpreter himself!' she said quickly. 'Oh! I'm so glad to see him; perhaps he'll help us to find Pete.'

'Do you know Farmer Murray?' asked Lady Dorothy.

'We spent a night in his house, ma'am, and little Pete called him Mr Interpreter.'

Lady Dorothy smiled.

The farmer had now entered the courtyard on his stout cob. The moment he saw Lady Dorothy he dismounted hastily.

'How do you do, Mr Murray?' called out the young lady. 'Have you come to see Lord Staunton?'

'Well, no, my lady, not exactly,' replied the farmer, his red face getting redder than ever; 'the fact is, I made bold to follow this little girl up here.'

'You want me?' said Loo, opening her eyes in astonishment.

'Yes, little girl, I do for certain; or, rather, your brother wants you. He's as like our Sammy, my lady, as one pea is like another.'

'Do you mean little Peter?' asked Lady Dorothy.

'Yes, my lady, I do. I found the poor little chap this morning, and I took him right home to my wife; and he is very bad, and more off his head than ever. He does nothing but cry out for Loo here, and this lad too—Joe he calls him. He says that he and Loo had lodged for the night at Miss Susan Price's, in the village. My wife's in an awful taking about the child. She declares, whatever happens, we're bound to humour him; and so I just got on the cob and rode straight off to the village to make inquiries of Miss Price, and she sent me here. I hope, I am sure, you will forgive the liberty I have taken, my lady.'

'I will not only forgive it, but I must thank you heartily for removing all our anxiety,' said Lady Dorothy, with her sweet, bright smile.—'Now, Loo, you'll be happy again. What a strange little boy!—Do you really think, Mr Murray, that the child is very ill?'

'It is not for me to say, my lady; my wife is in an awful state about him, and he is as

pinched and white as ever a child can be. My wife says it's a fever he has, but I'm none so sure.'

'Well, I'll tell you what it is,' said Lady Dorothy; 'the child must see Loo and Joe at once. The queer little trio must be got together again. Will you ride back at once to the farm, Mr Murray? and I'll bring the children over in my governess-cart. And will you, as you ride through the village, ask Dr Martin to call at your place to see the boy?'

'Thank you, my lady; I'll be sure to do so.'

Farmer Murray started off at once, and Lady Dorothy asked Joe and Loo to remain in the porch while she went to order the governess-cart.

It came round in a few minutes, and the children scarcely knew themselves when they got into it, and Lady Dorothy, stepping in beside them, took the reins and drove down the avenue at a brisk pace.

She was in her pretty white serge dress; she wore a sailor-hat on her head, with a simple band of white ribbon. No one could look more queenly or more gracious. It mattered nothing at all to Lady Dorothy that the children close to her were poor and ragged, or, rather, it mattered

a great deal, for they were the sort of people to whom her kind heart went out. As she drove rapidly in the direction of the Murrays' farm, she vowed to herself that she would not leave a stone unturned to help Loo and Peter; then turning her head, she saw Joe's great puzzled eyes fixed upon her face.

That look of Joe's went straight to her heart.

'Poor lad!' she said gently, 'I wonder if I can induce you to turn over a new leaf? I take a great interest in ragged, outcast London boys like you. I have started a little Home for them in Kent. I wonder if you would like to go there?'

'If you wish me to, ma'am,' muttered Joe, turning red, and then grinning from ear to ear.

'I think there is a vacancy,' said Lady Dorothy.
'If you went there you would have a chance;
but it is only fair to tell you, you would have rather a rough time of it at first.'

'What do you mean, ma'am? Isn't there wittles in the house?'

Lady Dorothy smiled.

'Heaps to eat, and good clothes to wear,' she said. 'That isn't the rough time I mean. The rough time to a boy like you, Joe, would be the restraint. You have been free all your life—free

to do wrong, poor boy; free to starve or to die. At my little Home you would have to be put in order; you would be trained to obey; you would be trained to conquer your sins, to please God, to learn to be a good man by-and-by. All that would mean a rough time at first, Joe. Are you willing to go through it?'

'Do you wish me to, lady?'

'Most assuredly I do.'

'Then I will!' said Joe, with great emphasis; 'I will!' Tears started to his eyes.

Loo gazed at him in astonishment. He took her hand and gave it a sudden squeeze.

'It's all right; I mean it, little matey,' he said in a hoarse whisper.

The governess-cart turned at this moment into Farmer Murray's farmyard. The geese cackled, the ducks quacked, and the old dog Dempster rose slowly from where he had been lying in the sun, and came to meet them.

'Here we are,' called out Lady Dorothy as she flung the reins to Farmer Murray; 'please take me at once to see the little pilgrim!'

CHAPTER XLV.

REAL PILGRIMAGE.

HEN the children followed Lady Dorothy into Mrs Murray's warm and cosy kitchen, they saw a sight which caused poor Loo's heart to fail her. Little Peter

was stretched straight out on a settee near the fire; his eyes were shut, there were burning spots of fever on his cheeks, and his breath was coming quickly. Dr Martin was bending over him; he was feeling his pulse and looking anxiously into the small, pinched face. When the doctor saw Lady Dorothy he stood up at once.

'Good-morning,' he said; 'you have asked me to call to see this poor little fellow?'

'Yes,' said Lady Dorothy. 'What do you think about him?'

'He is very ill, poor little chap! Has he any friends? If so'——

'I am his friend,' said Loo, rushing forward and flinging herself on the ground by Peter's side. 'I am his own born sister, and I love him better than any creature in all the wide world. He ain't going to die, is he, sir? Oh, please tell me that little Pete ain't going to die!'

'I hope not,' said the doctor; 'but I can't conceal the truth from you, my poor child, that the little fellow is very ill. We will do our best to restore him, however.'

'It is useless,' said Mrs Murray, who had not spoken a word until that moment; 'the poor child grows more and more like Sammy each minute. He's going to be with Sammy afore night, I make no doubt.'

'Oh, nothing of the kind,' said the doctor in a cheerful tone. 'The little boy is certainly very ill, but with care and nursing'——

'Which he shall have, doctor; you can make sure of that.'

'With care and nursing,' said the doctor, 'he may pull through yet.—But now, little girl, I should like to ask you one or two questions. This child has evidently been tramping about a good deal when he was in no condition for such violent exercise. Where do you come from?'

'We come from Pincher's Buildings, Westminster, London,' said Loo in a quick voice. 'Indeed? And why did you leave Pincher's Buildings to come into the country?'

'Because Pete wanted to go on pilgrimage.'

'That is his craze, sir,' said Mrs Murray, touching her forehead significantly.

'I see,' replied the doctor.—'Well, now, little girl, have you got any mother, or any relations in London?'

'Yes, sir, a mother.'

'And does she know where you are?'

'No, sir.'

'Have you got her address?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You had better give it to me at once, and I will write to her. She ought to come to the child without delay.'

'If you please, sir,' said Loo, colouring scarlet, 'I can write; I'm in third division—Board school.'

'Well, well, write immediately; write now, and get the letter posted. She ought to come down at once to take care of the child.'

It was in this way that Mrs Rankin first heard of Loo and Peter's extraordinary conduct. She was comfortably settled in her new place as cook, and, when she had time to think of her children, fancied Loo doing well in her little situation as

nursemaid, and Peter gaining health at the Convalescent Home. Poor Loo's letter quickly opened her eyes. She was very fond of Peter, and when she went to her mistress and told her the pitiful story, this kind lady gave her leave to go into the country immediately in order to see the child. Mrs Rankin therefore arrived at the Murrays' farm at Norton Melbury twenty-four hours after Loo had written to her. Mrs Murray received her kindly, and yet with a sort of jealousy which she could scarcely account for. This woman was the real mother of the child who resembled her own little dead Sammy. She took Mrs Rankin upstairs to Sammy's bedroom, where Peter was lying. His eyes were shut; he was asleep, and Lady Dorothy was seated by his bedside. Mrs Rankin could not help starting when she saw Lady Dorothy in her white dress, with her lovely golden hair and beautiful, heavenly blue eves.

'My word!' she muttered under her breath, 'they are good to poor folks in the country.'

Just at this moment Peter raised the heavy lids from his sleepy eyes, and looked straight up at Lady Dorothy. The evening sun was streaming into the room, and some of it fell across her hair and face. It made her look, in the little boy's eyes, quite like an angel.

'Charity,' he said in a low whisper, 'is this the Celestial City, and has God turned you into an angel?'

'No, not yet, Peter,' answered Lady Dorothy; 'this is Mrs Murray's dear little room, and you have got to get well.' She put a spoonful of beeftea between his lips as she spoke. He closed his eyes again and dropped off to sleep.

Strange to say, almost from that moment he began to mend. In a week's time he was completely out of danger.

I have brought Peter's story, as far as I know it, almost to an end.

Slowly, as he got better, the little boy learned what real pilgrimage meant from Lady Dorothy's gentle lips. He learned that there is a pilgrimage, which all who wish to be good must undertake. There is a Narrow Way, which those who seek God must walk in. There are lions in the path, and Hills of Difficulty to climb, and Valleys of Humiliation to walk through; and there is also a Celestial City, whose gates are never shut, day nor night. All these blessed things he learned about in the sweetest way, for Lady Dorothy took a great fancy

to the child, who still called her, in his quaint fashion, Charity. It was arranged, to Peter's own delight, and to Mrs Murray's rapture, that he was to spend at least a year at the farm, and as he could not be happy without Loo, and as Mrs Murray wanted a little maid to help her in all kinds of small ways, Loo remained also. How she enjoyed her life, how fat and strong she grew, how intimate she became with the wants of chickens and goslings, and pretty little tiny ducklings, and, in short, with all the creatures of the farm, it needs no words of mine to describe.

Joe was sent to the Home for Destitute Boys in Kent, and Lady Dorothy heard that, for love of her, he was putting great restraint upon himself, and was gradually being brought into training.

I have now only one thing more to say. In Lord Staunton's rabbit-warren may be seen to this day a patriarch bunny of specially large dimensions, who sits up and washes himself, and looks round upon his brother bunnies with eyes of grave wisdom. To this bunny has been given experiences which his innocent brothers and sisters have never even dreamt of. It is whispered in that rabbit-warren that on long winter evenings, ensconced in a specially snug burrow, this bunny is heard to

tell to special cronies that he was once entrapped to live for a short time with terrible two-legged creatures, who endeavoured to be kind to him, but who only made his life a long agony and terror, but that happily he escaped from them and came home again. He always winds up his story with these words, 'While I lived with them I went by the name of—Paul Pry.'

THE END.

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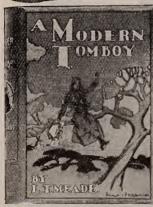


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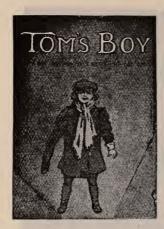
A London maiden, the daughter of a K.C., is sent to live in a humble cottage in Cornwall because of an act of insubordination in school, for which she is not wholly to blame. How she is tamed and humbled, and at the same time strengthened in character by contact with an unselfish cousin and some wholesome-minded Cornish girls, is related here with much spirit and unfailing humour. She does some brave and unselfish deeds, saves two lives from a wreck and her brother Freddy and a friend from death in a smuggler's cave. The reader will agree with Freddy when he said, "Thanks awfully for cheering my sister. I think she's jolly brave; and so are you all. And we've had a ripping time here."



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Drawn by W. RAINEY.

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"To the Author of Laddie, &c.

"THE WOMEN'S TEMPLE, CHICAGO, Octr. 29th, '95.

"Beloved Unknown Friend, —I have just finished Don, given me by Lady Henry Somerset. My secretary, Miss Gordon, has just read it aloud to me after the fatigues of our National Convention of Temperance Women at Baltimore. It has made us better, tenderer, more aspiring towards worth and gentleness of soul. . . . I know how strictly you preserve your incognito, but perhaps you will not mind receiving this loving word through your publishers. That you are a woman I feel so sure that I dare to address you thus endearingly.

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which looks as if it would end in tragedy, until the heroine, wiser through suffering, awakens to her true interests, and chooses the better part. "An absorbing story."—Daily Free Press.

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'I think, Saunders, this is yours.'

Drawn by LEWIS BAUMER.

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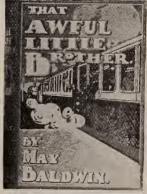
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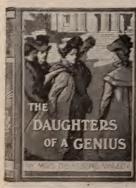




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'That's where the Wicket-Gate is,' she said.

Drawn by HAROLD COPPING.







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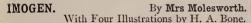
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A BUNCH OF KEYS, see page 48.



A tall figure in black was stooping over him and holding him back.

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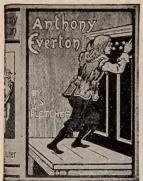
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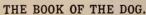
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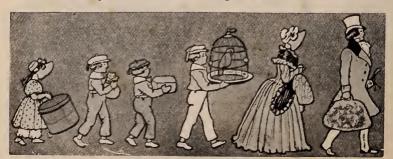
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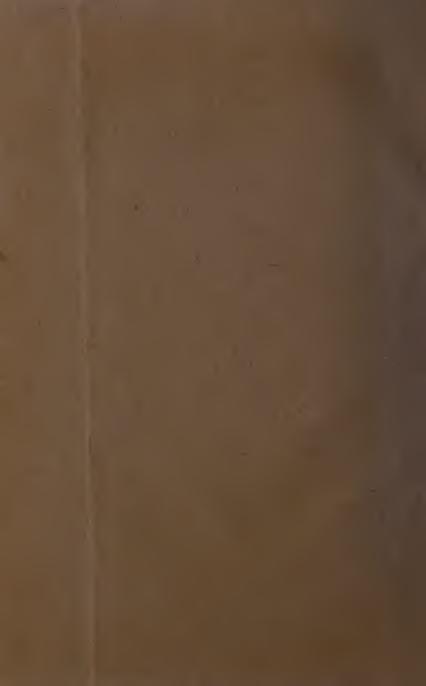
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